A Contemporary Interpretation of *Māyāvada*:

Advaita Vedānta and the Affirmation of the Material Universe

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Abstract: *Māyāvada* (the doctrine of *māyā*) is the Advaitin explanation of how the infinite *Brahman* is manifested as the finite material world. *Brahman* is unchanging and perfect; the locus of the changing and imperfect world. This paper has two aims. The first is to show that *māyāvada* affirms the reality of the material world, despite the claims of Paul Deussen and Prabhu Dutt Shāstrī to the contrary. To achieve this end a world-affirming *māyāvada* is formulated based on the metaphysics of Swami Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo. The second aim is to show that world-affirming *māyāvada* is a plausible metaphysical position which should be taken seriously in contemporary metaphysical debate. To achieve this some pluralist arguments against non-dualism are rejected, and it is explained how world-affirming *māyāvada* is preferable to pluralism when accounting for the ontological problems that arise from limitless decomposition and emergence due to quantum entanglement. Hence the conclusion of this paper will be that *māyāvada* is a plausible metaphysical position which affirms the reality of the material world.

Contents

1 Introduction

According to Advaita Vedānta, *Brahman* is the whole; the totality of all existence.[1] It is infinite, unchanging, and perfect. The experiential world, as we know, is finite, changing, and imperfect. *Māyāvada*, or the doctrine of *māyā*, is the metaphysical concept proposed by the Advaitins to explain how the perfect *Brahman* is manifested as the imperfect material world. It also explains our experience of, and existence within, that world. Since *Brahman* is eternal and unchanging, and the world is limited, temporal, and governed by cause and effect, the challenge is to describe how the former gives rise to the latter. In Aristotelian terms, *Brahman* is the material cause of the world. If the Advaitin system wishes to maintain the existence of *Brahman* as the whole then it must elucidate how *Brahman* is related to the world. *Māyāvada* is the Advaitin explanation of how the One becomes the many.

The aim of this paper is to reject the world-denying *māyāvada* proposed by Deussen, Shāstrī, *et al*, and compose in its place (and defend from objections) a world-affirming *māyāvada* which ascribes reality to the material world. We are motivated in this task for three simple reasons. Firstly, world-denying *māyāvada* is inconsistent with the ontologies of both Śamkara and various *śruti*, most notably the *Upanishads*. Secondly, world-denying *māyāvada* appears in elementary Indian philosophy texts with much greater frequency that its world-affirming counterpart. It is for this reason that Advaita Vedānta is often dismissed as a world-negating metaphysical system. Thirdly, world-affirming *māyāvada* proposes a balanced approach which discourages both extreme asceticism and

[1] For explanation of the technical terms used most regularly in this paper, including *Brahman* and the material world, please refer to the glossary of technical terms (p. 138), preferably before reading this paper.

exuberant materialism. Asceticism and individualistic materialism do not further the common good, and thus should be reduced in value in favour of the communitarian ideal provided by world-affirming *māyāvada*. World-denying *māyāvada* is neither consistent with the true Advaitin metaphysic, nor helpful in the greater field of comparative philosophy since it is the catalyst for the dismissal of Advaitin philosophy by the West, nor constructive in terms of positive societal action.

The world-affirming *māyāvada* advocated and defended in this paper is based on a synthesis of three influential twentieth century Advaitins, or 'Neo-Vedāntins': Swami Vivekananda; Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan; and Sri Aurobindo. The Neo-Vedāntin ethic has been covered in great detail, but their metaphysic has been somewhat neglected. The world-negating *māyāvada* does not solve the Advaitin world problem, but rather escapes from it. In proposing a cohesive Neo-Vedāntic *māyāvada* we hope to directly address and solve the problem of how the perfect *Brahman* can be manifested in the imperfect world. Only by maintaining the reality of the world can we unravel this ontological dilemma to explain the relationship between the whole and the part.

This paper is divided into five main sections. The first section, entitled '*Brahman*, the World, and *Māyāvada*', begins by examining the concept of the ultimately Real *Brahman* and contrasting it with the material world. Then it looks at the *māyāvada* of Śamkara, the original exponent of this theory. We argue that Śamkara's *māyāvada* affirms the reality of the world.

The second section, 'Evidence for World-Affirming *Māyāvada*', argues that *māyāvada* is characterised by its affirmation of the real world. One need not deny the reality of the world to prove the reality of *Brahman*. To support our thesis we draw evidence from two Advaitin sources; the *Upanishads* and the Neo-Vedāntins. We show that both sources confirm the world-affirming *māyāvada*.

In the third section, 'Four Features of the Neo-Vedāntic *Māyāvada*', we identify four features of the contemporary world-affirming *māyāvada*, which are 'self-limitation of *Brahman*'; 'inexplicable mystery'; 'one-sided dependence'; and 'concealment of *Brahman*'. These features explain the function of *māyā* so that a doctrine of unreality need not be used. The aim of this section is to propose a *māyāvada* that progresses, but remains consistent with, the general Advaitin metaphysic.

The fourth section, 'Defence of World-Affirming *Māyāvada*', focuses on defending world-affirming *māyāvada*. It begins with an examination and refutation of some historical arguments against the reality of the world. Then it defends world-affirming *māyāvada* from some contemporary Western pluralist objections, before ending with two arguments for world-affirming *māyāvada* which deny the pluralist intuitions.

The fifth and final section, 'Implications of World-Affirming *Māyāvada*', looks at some metaphysical and ethical implications of world-affirming *māyāvada*. First it examines the metaphysical implications of the four features of world-affirming *māyāvada*. Then it looks at the social and ethical implications of this theory for

Advaita and the world, focusing on the work of Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo.

In India it is generally held that the highest philosophical truths are contained in the *śruti* (authoritative texts, such as the *Upanishads* and the *Vedānta Sūtra*) of the past. Whether or not this is indeed the case, it is clear that we must progress and adapt all philosophy in accordance with the needs of the moment. To contribute meaningfully to the field of Indian and comparative philosophy we must reconstruct *māyāvada* to make it relevant and applicable to our lives today. World-affirming *māyāvada* adequately explains the relationship between *Brahman* and the modern world while remaining consistent with the *māyāvada* found in the *śruti*. Continual adaptation is necessary because times change and certain ideas can be left behind. It is over one hundred years since Vivekananda brought Vedānta to the West via his famous speech in Chicago, over eighty years since Radhakrishnan published his seminal *Indian Philosophy*, and almost sixty years since Aurobindo published his equally influential *Life Divine*. The world-affirming *māyāvada* constructed in this paper is both consistent with the *śruti* of the past, and defendable in the realm of contemporary metaphysics.

2 *Brahman*, the World, and *Māyāvada*

In this section we shall explain in detail the world problem and its Advaitin solution. The problem may be summarised thus: the whole (*Brahman*) is unchanging and unique, and holds these properties exclusively. It precedes and is the material cause of the world. The parts of the world are dependent upon *Brahman* for their existence, but not *vice versa*. *Brahman* is exclusively basic. We believe that it is possible to affirm the reality of the parts while ascribing ultimate Reality to the whole. Moreover, this affirmation concurs with the *māyāvada* expounded by Śamkara, the original Advaita Vedāntin.

Brahman is the only entity that is permanent; everything else is in a constant state of flux. To the Advaitin, permanence is a necessary condition of ultimate Reality; hence *Brahman* is ultimate Reality, the highest truth. Moreover, *Brahman* is the One; the source of all things. Now if *Brahman* is the source of all things, then we must explain how something permanent and perfect can give rise to the impermanent and imperfect phenomenal world. In other words, as Radhakrishnan states, the problem is that "the Real is one, yet we have the two".[2] The Advaitic solution lies in the assertion that the existence of the phenomenal world is due to *māyā*. *Brahman* is the base of *māyā*, and *māyā* gives rise to the material world. Viewed transcendentally, *māyā* does not coexist with *Brahman*, but rather is manifested by it, for *Brahman* has no equal. As such *māyā* is dependently real, whereas *Brahman* is ultimately Real. Again, we must explain how the Whole is manifested as the parts; how the infinite *Brahman* can be manifested as the finite material world. Mahadevan summarises the problem succinctly:

[2] Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli (1923), *Indian Philosophy*, I, p. 186.

> Truth, knowledge, infinitude is *Brahman*. Mutable, non-intelligent, finite and perishing is the world. *Brahman* is pure attributeless, impartite and immutable. The world is a manifold of changing phenomena, fleeting events and finite things… The problem for the Advaitin is to solve how from the pure *Brahman* the impure world of men and things came into existence. It is on this rock that most of the monistic systems break.[3]

In other words, since in Advaitic philosophy *Brahman* is characterised as being infinite, perfect, and formless; and the material world is characterised as being finite, imperfect, and spatial; it stands to reason that one may wish to question how the former can be manifested as the latter. These two 'grades' of existence are called *pāramārthika* (transcendent or absolute existence) and *vyāvahārika* (existence for practical purpose). The Advaitin must therefore explain, using *māyāvada*, how something perfect can be the basis for something imperfect, and yet remain perfect. *Māyā*, then, occupies a pivotal position in Advaitin metaphysics, for it clarifies how and why Reality can exist and manifest Itself in the phenomenal world even though we cannot see nor understand It. It is because of *māyā* that we mistake subjective experience for true knowledge. Let us now examine the Advaitic conceptions of *Brahman* and the material world.

2.1 *Brahman*

To define *Brahman* is no easy task. There are three ways in which It may be characterised: positively (what It is); negatively (what It is not); and prescriptively (practical suggestive meaning). We hold that *Brahman* must be described

[3] Mahadevan, T.M.P. (1957), *The Philosophy of Advaita*, p. 227.

prescriptively if It is to be understood correctly. Firstly, however, we shall attempt a positive description of *Brahman* to highlight the inadequacies of this approach.

Brahman is regularly described as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss). In other words, *Brahman* is pure being, pure consciousness, and pure bliss. These are not properties of *Brahman*, as there is no property-property possessor distinction in *Brahman*. Rather, they are referents which may be used to point towards (but not adequately describe) *Brahman*. Now let us explain *sat-cit-ananda*. Firstly, *Brahman* is held to be pure being because It cannot be negated: "*Brahman* cannot be negated; for then the negation would require another witness – another substratum. So there will be…*regressus ad infinitum*".[4] *Brahman* has no equal, and so cannot be witnessed. But since *Brahman* cannot be negated, neither can it be determined, for as Spinoza asserts, all determination is limitation, and all limitation is negation.[5] To determine what a thing is necessarily relies on the determination of what it is *not*, which is a form of negation. For example, included in the determination that an apple is red is the concurrent assertion that it is neither orange nor blue. *Brahman* is by definition the Whole and is thus indeterminable in virtue of the fact that it is 'not-not anything'.

Secondly, *Brahman* is held to be pure consciousness because it is Its own manifestation; no separate cause of Its manifestation can be conceived. It is constantly self-illuminated, and thus the cause of Its revelation is Its very nature. *Brahman* cannot be an object of knowledge, because all objects of knowledge are

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[4] Roychoudhury, A.K. (1955), *The Doctrine of Maya*, p. 111.
[5] Spinoza, Baruch (1930), 'Letter 50', in John Wild (ed.), *Spinoza Selections*, p. 454.

manifested by something else. Similarly, something unreal such as a hare's horn is not an object of knowledge, for it is non-existent. But the commonality between *Brahman* and a hare's horn ends here, for the former is Real, whereas the latter is unreal and as such can neither be self-manifested nor manifested by another. Conversely, *Brahman* is always manifested, for It is manifestation *per se*, and Its revelation is the necessary presupposition for any knowledge. We may also note that according to Advaita pure consciousness is also required for the revelation of empirical objects.

Thirdly, *Brahman* is held to be pure bliss. When *Brahman* is 'filtered' through *māyā* it becomes the *jīva*, the living or personal soul (as distinguished from the universal soul). The bliss of *Brahman* in this instance is shown by the *jīva's* love for itself. The self also loves other things, although from the point of view of the *jīva* love of other things is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Roychoudhury states: "self-love is proved in dreamless sleep. In that state, no knowledge of any object exists, because the mind, then, is merged in its material cause, the *ajñāna* [*māyā*]".[6] As a manifestation of *Brahman*, then, the *jīva* proves the bliss of *Brahman* because of the love it has for itself. Thus *Brahman* is characterised as being-consciousness-bliss.

Another aspect of *Brahman* is that It is infinite (again, this is a referent rather than a property), and as such is not limited by time, space, or any other thing.[7] Time

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[6] Roychoudhury (1955), p. 113.

[7] *Brahman* is infinite. Is the Western conception of the universe infinite? Well, it is commonly accepted that the universe is larger than we can possibly observe, since we can only observe things that are within 13.7 billion light years, which is the time since the big bang. Due to the period of inflation, where space itself expanded, the expanse of the universe is greater than 13.7 billion light years. So it is certainly impossible to subjectively observe the totality of the universe, which is

cannot limit It because It is permanent, and space cannot limit It because It is omnipresent. It cannot be limited by another thing because It is the source of all things. If *Brahman* were to be limited by another thing, then that thing would necessarily exist alongside it; an impossible situation, for *Brahman* is one without a second. Furthermore, being is to be considered as non-different from consciousness. If being were different from consciousness then the latter would become the object of the former, and consequently would be false. Pure consciousness, however, is perfect knowledge. It follows that bliss can neither be different from being nor consciousness, for otherwise it would be an object of knowledge and therefore false. But bliss is not an object of knowledge, but rather an internal desire (such as self-love), and thus cannot be false.

The description of *Brahman* as being-consciousness-bliss does not imply that it has qualities of any sort, as it is devoid of all determination, as we have noted above. Advaita claims that these words are used to make *Brahman* in some way intelligible to the human mind; they are super-impositions. They are indicators, not accurate descriptions of *Brahman*. They are neither universals nor properties of *Brahman*, so the term *Brahman* is neither a proper name nor a definite description.[8] It does not possess the properties of being-consciousness-bliss, since It is not a thing which can be determined. So *Brahman* cannot be established by *prananas* such as inference or perception. *Brahman* exists, but Its existence cannot be understood by the subjective intellect. So the positive and negative

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consistent with the Advaitic assertion. Moreover, the theory of emergence (which we shall examine in detail below) shows that the whole can possess properties are not possessed by any of its parts. Even if the totality of the parts were finite, there seems to be no reason to suggest that the whole could not be infinite.

[8] Shaw, J.L. (2000), 'The Advaita Vedanta on Meaning', in J.L. Shaw (ed.), *Concepts of Knowledge East and West*, Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, pp. 370-1.

approaches succeed in describing *Brahman* at a certain level, but fail to perfectly describe It. As Aurobindo maintains:

> [*Brahman*] is describable neither by our negations, *neti-neti*, for we cannot limit It by saying It is not this, It is not that, nor for that matter our affirmations, for we cannot fix It by saying It is this, It is that, *iti-iti*.[9]

The approach of the Neo-Vedāntin, specifically Vivekananda, is to describe *Brahman* prescriptively. That is, a description of suggestive meaning, based on the practical application of Advaitin metaphysics, can describe *Brahman* in terms of what we *ought* to do, what the goal of *Brahman*-knowledge (*jñana*) means for us. The concept of Oneness, which we shall examine in detail in our analysis of *māyāvada* below, represents not only an ontological standpoint, but also an ideal which can be realised in our lifetime. For Vivekananda, then, the word '*Brahman*' is the description of love, truth, bliss, and freedom, which are the goals of the Neo-Vedāntin.[10] The Oneness of all things, as described and explained by *māyāvada*, is the goal of realisation and is represented by *Brahman*. Hence as we proceed in our discussion of *māyāvada* the prescriptive interpretation of *Brahman* shall also be developed.

2.2 The Material World

Before we begin, let us first make clear that in this paper the term 'material world' refers to the material universe. We simply use the term 'world' to avoid confusion, since it has already been established in this field. Experience of the

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[9] Aurobindo (1951), *The Life Divine*, p. 383.
[10] Shaw (2000), p. 373.

material world is characterised by plurality and change. The difference between the world-view of the materialist and that of the Advaitin is that for the former, plurality and change are fundamentally real features of the world, whereas for the latter they are only penultimately real, a manifestation of the ultimately Real *Brahman*. Nevertheless, we hold that the correct ontological status of the Advaitin world is one of qualified reality. Hence the material world is a synthesis of limited (real) and unlimited (Real) being. *Brahman* is the locus of the world, and as such is reflected in it, although it is not always easy to see. Vivekananda states:

> Coming from abstractions to the common, everyday details of our lives, we find that our whole life is a contradiction, a mixture of existence and non-existence. There is this contradiction in knowledge… [A man] cannot solve [his problems], because he cannot go beyond his intellect. And yet that desire is implanted strongly in him.[11]

There is a desire to transcend our material limitations, and they cannot be transcended because we are limited. We can, for example, understand the concepts of infinity, perfection, and so on. But since our material nature is finite, we may never *experience* infinity or perfection. The material world is neither perfect being nor non-being. The ultimate *Ātman* causes our desire to possess true knowledge. Advaitin epistemology is thus characterised by the inner struggle between the infinite *Ātman* and the finite *ātman*. We participate in both the infinite and the finite. Our desires are often inconsistent and selfish, but we know that unselfishness is good: "our heart asks us to be selfish [but] there is some

[11] Vivekananda (1999), *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, II, p. 91.

power beyond us which says that it is unselfishness alone which is good".[12] Unselfish action is the physical expression of the infinite Oneness in the finite world, for unselfishness creates happiness which is the finite manifestation of the bliss (*ānanda*) of *Brahman*.

Death is a good example of change in the world. Advaita asserts that our true nature is the permanent *Ātman*, and yet material life is permeated with death: "The whole world is going towards death; everything dies… Somehow, we do not know why, we cling to life; we cannot give it up".[13] Death in this context represents impermanence, and highlights the difference between *Brahman* and the world. We are influenced by both the finite and the infinite. We are temporally and materially bound (and so we die), but we long for something more due to the *Brahman-Ātman* that is our essence and the essence of the world.

A unique feature of Neo-Vedantic metaphysics is the characterisation of the world as a combination of consciousness (*purusa*) and matter (*prakrti*). Specifically, pure consciousness is combined with matter to form the material world. The categories of *purusa* and *prakrti* originate in Sāmkhya thought, and have been incorporated into the Neo-Vedāntic system. But while Sāmkhyans are dualists, Advaitins are non-dualists. The former state that *purusa* and *prakrti* are two separate, eternal, and ultimate realities. Conversely, the latter hold the distinction between *purusa* and *prakrti* to be only penultimately real as manifestations of *Brahman*. Thus consciousness and matter may be distinguished at the penultimate level, but not at the ultimate level, for all is *Brahman*. Consciousness

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[12] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 91.
[13] Vivekananda (1999), II, pp. 92-3.

and matter are the products of the self-manifestation of *Brahman*. Radhakrishnan asserts:

> Since [*Brahman*] is able to produce the universe by means of the two elements of Its being, *prakrti* and *purusa*, matter and consciousness, they are said to be *māyā* (higher and lower) of [*Brahman*].[14]

Every phenomenal manifestation of Reality is a combination of consciousness and matter, and it is this duality that characterises the phenomenal world. Moreover, although an object might be more of consciousness than matter, or *vice versa*, the total combined amount of consciousness and matter is always equal across all things. All material things possess this duality. How is this so? The Advaitin explanation is that the material world is created when ultimate Reality interacts with unmanifested matter: "In the world process itself, we have [*Brahman*] interacting with primal matter, what Indian thinkers call the unmanifested *prakrti*".[15] The unmanifested *prakrti* is not distinct from Reality; rather they are non-different since the former is a manifestation of the latter: "this *prakrti* or *māyā* is not independent of spirit".[16] *Prakrti* is what constructs duality and change out of what is non-dual and unchanging. Consciousness is inserted into the 'womb' of primal matter, and hence all objects are a synthesis of Reality and reality.

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[14] Radhakrishnan (1923), I, p. 547.
[15] Radhakrishnan (1952a), 'Reply to Critics', in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, p. 802.
[16] Radhakrishnan (1952b), *History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western*, I, p. 276.

The material world is neither ultimately Real nor unreal. It is not unreal, since we experience it. But neither is it ultimately Real, because it is sublated by true knowledge. The Neo-Vedantin advocates a process of ‘practical necessity’ that prepares the subjective mind for the transition between subjectivity and objectivity.[17] This transition involves several gradual changes: from energy into matter; matter to life; subconscious to conscious activity; primitive mentality to reason and observation; and passivity to the conscious search for self-transcendence.[18] These processes prepare the path for the realisation of *Brahman*.

Worldly existence is characterised by opposites, which remain in (oppositional) harmony. They are balanced due to their dependence upon *Brahman*, and yet cannot be resolved in non-contradictory terms until we arrive at *Brahman*. In the material world, each positive is concealed by its corresponding negative, which is contained in it and emerges from it: infinite and finite; conditioned and unconditioned; qualified and unqualified.[19] Moreover, there are two more existential pairs – transcendent and cosmic; universal and individual – where each truth is contained in its apparent opposite. Conversely, at the *Brahman* level there is only Oneness: “we cannot bind [*Brahman*] by our law of contradictions”.[20]

We wish to transcend the material state to achieve perfection (or at least conclusive accomplishment) at all levels. But we cannot, due to the very fact that these desires are effects of material life, which in turn is an effect of *māyā*. Material contradictions can only be resolved by understanding the non-duality of

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[17] Aurobindo (1951), p. 326.
[18] Reyna, Ruth (1962), *The Concept of Māyā: From the Vedas to the 20th Century*, p. 44.
[19] Aurobindo (1951), p. 342.
[20] Aurobindo (1951), pp. 342-3.

Brahman. Subjectively there is contradiction and distinction; objectively there is not. These are the two ways of looking at the same thing: objectivity is ultimately Real; subjectivity is dependently real; and neither is illusory. Aurobindo correctly argues that it is in this context that we must understand Śamkara's statement: "The eternal is true; the world is a lie [*mithya*]".[21] The world is a 'lie', not because it is illusory or unreal, but rather because it is permeated with subjective knowledge (as opposed to objective knowledge) which prevents the observer from knowing that all things are of the same essence.

2.3 *Māyāvada*: the Advaitic Solution to the World Problem

To explain in non-contradictory terms the relationship between *Brahman* and the world we are now faced with two choices with regards to the latter. Do we deny its reality and claim that all material experience is unreal, or do we affirm its reality and claim that it is real, but not ultimately Real? We hold that the latter option is preferable, and shall argue for this conclusion throughout the course of this paper. There are many people, however, who believe the former option to be superior. Murti summarises the problem thus:

> Absolutism entails the distinction between the *pāramārtha* [ultimately Real] and the *vyāvahārika* [relatively real]; it formulates the doctrine of two 'truths'; it also implies a theory of illusion.[22]

In other words, Murti holds that any non-dual philosophy or religion, including Advaita Vedānta, must identify a distinction between the ultimately Real and the

[21] Śamkara, *Vivekachudamani* 20, in Aurobindo (1951), p. 394.
[22] Murti, T.R.V. (1955), *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, p. 104.

empirically or relatively real. This results in a doctrine of two truths and, accordingly, a theory of illusion to explain the relationship.[23] Advaita *does* posit a distinction between that which is ultimately Real on the one hand, and that which is empirically or phenomenally real on the other. So although the term 'two truths' might be conceived of as slightly convoluted, we accept that the existence of higher and lower versions of reality in Advaitin metaphysics results in a doctrine of two levels of reality, at the very least. At the very most, of course, the two truths can be perceived as the distinction between what is real and what is not. This is the claim made by some Advaitins and critics of Advaita, that *Brahman* alone is real and the material world unreal:

> That the world or the whole realm of empirical reality is mere illusory appearance without any substance is the fundamental doctrine of Advaita Vedānta.[24]

We believe that there is another interpretation of the Advaitin metaphysic which provides a more adequate explanation of the world, which holds the material world to be real as a manifestation of *Brahman*. We hold that this interpretation is preferable for two reasons: it is closer to (more consistent with) the ontologies of Śamkara and other prominent Advaitin metaphysicians; and correlates with the empirical evidence at hand, namely that the world seems real in every sense! In the fifth section of this paper we shall show why arguments against the reality of the world fail. Our aim in this section, however, is to show that *māyāvada*, properly understood, is world-affirming. We believe that *māyāvada* must be

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[23] Oldmeadow, Harry (1992), 'Sankara's Doctrine of Māyā', in *Asian Philosophy* 2, p. 132.
[24] Dravid, N.S. (1994), 'The Illusoriness of the World', in R. Balasubramanian (ed.), *The Tradition of Advaita*, p. 129.

properly understood, particularly in the West, if Eastern philosophies such as Advaita are to survive and prosper. Many Advaitins, such as Parsons, Cohen, and Tolle, misinterpret *māyāvada* to mean that the world is unreal. Take Parsons for example: "There is no anywhere. There is no time or space except in the appearance. There is nothing but this, and this is nothing happening".[25] Not only is this passage nonsensical, but it also contradicts what we shall show is the actual theory of *māyā*. Similarly, Mickoski states: "The world is an illusion, a great dream".[26] It is symptomatic of philosophers of this type that they beg the ontological question by stating that what they say is true because it is true that the world is unreal. The metaphysical problem is rarely, if ever, addressed. Nonetheless they are very popular among the public. Moreover, introductory works on Indian philosophy often describe the world as unreal. For example, King asserts: "[Śamkara] propounds the view that the world of diversity is nothing more than an illusory appearance (*māyā*)".[27] Chennakesavan contrasts *Brahman* with the "finite unreal world", and holds that *māyāvada* "shows up the false plurality of the universe as true. It conceals the real and projects the unreal".[28] As mentioned above, it is due to this type of misunderstanding that Advaita is often conceived of as a nihilistic world-negating philosophy: "The conflation of *māyā* with illusionism, like that of *karma* with fatalism, has been the bane of Hinduism".[29] As we progress through this paper, then, it should become

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[25] Parsons, Tony, from the Tony Parsons website: http://www.theopensecret.com. Accessed 01/04/07.
[26] Mickoski, Howdie, from the Howdie Mickoski website: http://www.howdietalks.com. Accessed 01/04/07.
[27] King, Richard (1999), *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, p. 54.
[28] Chennakesavan, Sarasvati (1976), *Concepts of Indian Philosophy*, p. 93.
[29] Sharma, Arvind (2005), *Modern Hindu Thought: An Introduction*, p. 31.

very clear why these theses should be rejected due to their basic lack of understanding of the doctrine of *māyāvada*.

Although Śamkara's traditional *māyāvada* holds that the world is neither ultimately Real nor unreal, many critics of Advaita incorrectly blame him for the misconception of *māyāvada* as world-denying:

> But the greatest blunder of Śamkara was, to regard these limitations [of the material world] as unreal, as illusions, caused by ignorance, and thus to deny the plurality of existents altogether. In his pantheistic zeal for Pure Being, he completely ignored experience, sought to suppress all that is finite, in favour of the Infinite.[30]

But Śamkara's *māyāvada* is not world-denying. It is a doctrine of non-duality, not unreality. Correctly interpreted, Śamkara's ontology not only avoids the logical problems encountered by those who claim the world to be unreal, but also concurs with the dominant positions of the *Upanishads* and the Neo-Vedāntins, as we shall demonstrate in the following chapter.

One possible source of confusion is due to the fact that Śamkara's *guru* Gaudapāda, presumably under the influence of Buddhism, likens ordinary experience to dreaming: "Like a dream and magic are seen, and just as a mirage city is seen in the sky, so is this universe seen by those who are well-versed in the

[30] Dutt, N.K. (1931), *The Vedānta: Its Place as a System of Metaphysics*, p. 192.

Vedānta".[31] Hence a distinction is made between metaphysical Reality (*Brahman*) and unreality (the world). Rather different is the position of Śamkara, who posits not only a metaphysical distinction, but also an *epistemological* distinction between Reality and unreality, whereby that which is real is relative to the level of knowledge of the one for whom it is real. This position claims that ultimate Reality is that which is real relative to an ultimate state of true knowledge. *Māyā*, on the other hand, is the experience of that which is only real to those who do not possess such ultimate knowledge. Shastri maintains that the *māyā* imposed on *Brahman* can be viewed from three different perspectives, namely, the transcendental, the rational, and the empirical.[32] Only the transcendental is the outcome of ultimate knowledge. Although experience in *māyā* does not amount to true knowledge, it is experience nonetheless that has some value and is not completely unreal as is often mistakenly believed.

We should now clarify in detail the distinction between reality and ultimate Reality. There is only one thing that can be called Real (*sat*), and that is ultimate Reality, or *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the locus of all that is real, such as the material universe. Anything that does not possess *Brahman* as its base is said to be false (*asat*), like a logical impossibility such as a hare's horn. *Asat* is defined as "that which does not appear in any locus as existent".[33] The universe is not unreal, because we experience it. It is real, but not ultimately Real. This distinction between Reality and reality should help to avoid the confusion that so often arises due to imprecise terminology regarding this subject. Ultimate Reality is defined

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[31] Gaudapada, *Karika* 2.31, in Peter Forrest (1995), '*Māyā* and the Pluralist Predicament', in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73, p. 32.
[32] Shastri, Dinesh Chandra (1981), *Bhārаīya Darsana Kosa: Vedānta*, p. 279.
[33] Shastri, D.C. (1981), p. 9.

by Śamkara as "that awareness which does not vary with its object" (It cannot be denied); and reality as "that which does vary with its object".[34] In post-Śamkaran Advaita, Reality is defined as "unsublatable throughout the three times (ie. past, present, and future)".[35] In other words, It is eternal and infinite. Thus when, for example, Śamkara uses the words 'unreal' or 'false' to describe the world, what he means is that the world is real, but not ultimately Real. As such the world is neither *sat* nor *asat*.

As the first to properly define the concept, *māyāvada* is Śamkara's metaphysical conception of the world and all existence, which he claims to be based on experience, not mere hypothesis or assumption, and as such is "the logical pendant to [the] doctrine of *Brahman* as the undifferentiated self-shining truth".[36] Śamkara is unique in his assertion that the difference in perception between Reality and reality is an epistemological one. Let us examine this concept in more detail. As Iyer states: "the disparity between appearance and reality [in Śamkara] is mainly due to the inherent limitations in our sensory and intellectual apparatus. Owing to these limitations things appear to us other than what in reality they really are".[37] As subjective beings, therefore, we cannot perceive the ultimate Reality, for by definition our senses are subjective and limited and thus incapable of such perception.

Our inherent subjectivity is the personal explanation of the ontological *māyā*. It separates the original whole and reconstructs it as a world characterised by

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[34] Śamkara, *Bhagavadgītābhāsya* 2. 16.
[35] Potter, Karl H. (1972), *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, p. 221.
[36] Roychoudhury (1955), p. 76.
[37] Iyer, M.K.V. (1964), *Advaita Vedānta According to Śamkara*, pp. 66-7.

difference and change. Śamkara states: "*Brahman*, viewed through our intellect, appears as split into subject and object, as *Īśvara*, the *jīva*, and the world".[38] What is presented at the *nirvikalpaka* (knowledge not depending upon or derived from the senses) level is the unqualified *Brahman*. Owing to the operation of *māyā*, we impose names and forms onto *Brahman*, which is essentially a nameless and formless entity. In other words, in the world we view *Brahman* as a thing of diversity and change, existing in time and space.

Knowledge of *Brahman* is attained through cognition or consciousness (*jñāna*), whereas knowledge of the world is gained through various *prananas* such as perception or inference on the other. The truth of *Brahman* cannot be realised through limited sense experience. Thus experiences such as fear and desire can be regarded as mental modes, but not as cognitions.[39] Bhattacharya identifies three levels of knowledge in Advaita Vedānta. First, there is *Brahman* as pure consciousness. At this level consciousness has no form, and there is no distinction between the knower and the known. Second, there is *Brahman* conceived as the self, due to ignorance (*avidyā*), an imposed property (*upādhi*) which makes the infinite appear as the finite. Third, there is consciousness and cognition as two difference forms of knowledge. The difference between this level and the second is the difference between being deluded and being aware of the delusion. At this level there are three types of objects: self-revealing; revealed by consciousness; and revealed by valid cognition. Only *Brahman* is of the first type. Ignorance and mental modes are revealed by consciousness, the second type. Material objects, such as a hat or a pot are revealed by valid cognition, the

[38] Śamkara, *The Works of Sri Sankaracharya*, Vol. XVI, p. 209.
[39] Bhattacharya, Pandit Srimohan (2000), 'The Use of the Word *Pramā*: Valid Cognition in Advaita Vedānta', in J.L. Shaw (ed.), *Concepts of Knowledge East and West*, p. 87.

third type.[40] *Jñāna*, then, is a mental mode that is due to valid cognition or consciousness, and the result of this mode is the sublation of ignorance. A mode of the mind is called *jñāna* if (and only if) it is due to valid cognition. *Māyā* is characterised by the lack of valid cognition (*ajñāna*) and hence cannot realise *Brahman* through our subjective manifestation of *māyā*.

Because of *ajñāna*, then, we see change and duality in the world, but in reality *Brahman* is not subject to the smallest amount of change or division. *Brahman* is in no way affected by our subjective inadequacies, as Śamkara asserts:

> From the transcendental standpoint *Brahman* remains immutable, quite unaffected by what we think about it. The descent of spirit is only apparent and not real. Thus both *Īśvara* and *Jīva* are the outcome of nescience. If both of them are rid of their respective adjuncts they will merge in *Brahman*, even as the image will get back to the original when the reflecting medium is broken.[41]

That by means of which we limit something that is unlimited is called *upādhi*. For example, the same part of space can be limited in different ways by means of a table, a pot, and so on. Thus we make separate assertions regarding each object, namely, 'space limited by a table', 'space limited by a pot', and so on. This can also apply to *Brahman*, where unlimited *Brahman* is limited by distinguishing between objects, so that independent Reality becomes dependent reality. Viewed objectively, the distortions created by our subjective sensory organs are *upādhi*. Hence *upādhi* is not an independent entity that separates the material world from

[40] Bhattacharya (2000), pp. 83-8.
[41] Śamkara, Vol. XVI, pp. 59, 173.

Brahman, but rather is the product of the objectification and externalisation of the subjective and internal. As a subjective intellectual limitation we call this phenomena *ajñāna*, and as a cosmic factor we call it *māyā*.

Before we continue, we must confront a misconception regarding the ontological status of *māyā*. It is often claimed by critics of Śamkara that for there to be concealment or projection of *Brahman*, *māyā* must be co-existent with *Brahman*, which would mean that *Brahman* is no longer 'the One without a second'. Moreover, it is claimed that the Advaitin cannot explain *from whence māyā* operates. Its base cannot be *Brahman*, for *Brahman* is absolute truth in which there is no space for ignorance; nor can it be the *jīva*, for the *jīva* is a product of *māyā*, not *vice versa*.

To this objection we may reply that time and space are products of *māyā*, and therefore cannot be said to exist prior to *māyā*. *Brahman* and *māyā* exist independently of time and space; they are neither spatial nor temporal, so it is meaningless to question whether *māyā* comes before or after the *jīva*. Furthermore, the concept of time, like the concept of identity in difference, is not really self-explanatory and therefore has no application to ultimate Reality. Let us clarify this point. An event has a beginning and an end. If time also has a beginning and an end, then why should one conceive of time encapsulating the event and not *vice versa*? Moreover, if time has a beginning and an end, one must question what existed before time began and what will exist after time ends. If something did and will exist before and after time, then one must ask again whether *that* something has a beginning and an end. One would then find oneself

in an infinite regress, and thus time cannot be regarded as a self-explanatory concept.

According to Śamkara, then, time and space are related to sense perception and do not apply to that which is beyond subjectivity. *Māyā* is dependant on experience and it is therefore meaningless to question its origin and existence in time. The only relevant question to be asked regarding *māyā* concerns its nature and final destiny. We shall now discuss the nature of *māyā* and explain why its existence does not imply material unreality. A common misconception regarding Advaita Vedānta is that it characterises the human condition as a choice between two options – suffering and misery on the one hand; or enlightenment and eternal bliss on the other. We shall show that this is simply not the case at all.

Central to Advaitic philosophy, of course, is the doctrine of non-duality. As Satapathy remarks, Advaita does not "denounce distinction at all in favour of a blind monism", but rather "seeks to grant and uphold distinction through limiting condition or *upādhis* as recognition of water bubbles, foam and waves in relation to the sea and thus drives the basic point home that though distinct, the world which is the enjoyed object is non-different from its ultimate unitary ground, *Brahman*".[42] Thus the non-dual nature of Advaita asserts that the material world is not unreal. We find here a conflict of opinions among various scholars with regards to the perceived negativity of *māyā*. Some, such as Iyer, claim that *māyā* is a negative entity that contradicts the absolute truth of *Brahman*. Others, such as Roychoudhury, Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo, argue that *māyā* is

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[42] Satapathy, D.R. (1992), *The Doctrine of Māyā in Advaita Vedānta*, p. 41.

not negative, but real, even though it may be indescribable. We agree with the latter. There is much more to this philosophy than the polarisation of suffering and enlightenment.

The non-dual *māyā* is neither ultimately Real (*sat*); nor unreal (*asat*); nor simultaneously Real and unreal (*sadasat*). Since *māyā* is experienced it cannot be wholly unreal. But it disappears with the acquisition of *jñāna*, and thus cannot be completely Real. Roychoudhury summarises this position:

> [*Māyā*] cannot be Real; for it is destroyed by knowledge. The Real can never be sublated… Nor can it be said to be *asat* (unreal); for it is the material cause of the world. An unreal thing like [a] hare's horn cannot be the source of anything. So if we take it to be unreal then there will be no explanation of this world which is an object of an immediate experience… It cannot also be *sadasat*. Contrary qualities like being and non-being cannot simultaneously belong to the same thing… It is indeterminate in the sense that it cannot be described either as *sat* or as *asat* or even as *sadasat*, but as something distinct from being and non-being.[43]

When knowledge exists, *māyā* ceases to exist, and therefore *māyā* is unknowable: "It is a mere appearance, a ghost which haunts dark places. It swiftly disappears into nothingness with the advent of light. *Māyā* cannot therefore be made intelligible… Just as darkness disappears with light even so *māyā* vanishes with the advent of right knowledge".[44] In Advaita Vedānta there is no allowance for knowledge and ignorance to coexist side by side. When knowledge replaces ignorance on any given subject the latter is not banished to another place, but

[43] Roychoudhury (1955), p. 77. Note that 'being' and 'non-being' are technical terms here.
[44] Iyer (1964), p. 73.

rather vanishes into nothingness. On a grander scale, *ajñāna* disappears with the advent of *jñāna*: "*ajñāna* is destroyed by knowledge".[45] *Māyā* is inexplicable at the intellectual level; yet when we rise to the *Brahman*-level of knowledge *māyā* completely vanishes and there is nothing left to explain. According to the Nyāya-Vaiśesika and others, *māyā* is nothing more than a negative entity, the negation or absence of *jñāna*. Assuming that what is meant here is the negativity of *māyā* explained by the absence of cognition in general, we may oppose this claim by stating that *māyā* cannot entail the negation of all knowledge:

> For a negation to be known, requires the previous knowledge of the negatum and the locus of the negatum. When we say that there is negation of knowledge in the self, we are bound to admit the existence of the knowledge of the negatum (knowledge) there. But knowledge and its negation being contradictory, cannot lie in the same substratum at the same time. Hence it cannot be said that *ajñāna* is the negation of all knowledge.[46]

In other words, to negate something is to first understand the thing that is to be negated. In Advaitin epistemology knowledge and ignorance are bound together, as "awareness of knowledge and awareness of ignorance go together inasmuch as there is an awareness of the limit of what I know".[47] Knowledge means that not only are we aware of what we know, but also of what we do not know. This statement is made in reference to empirical knowledge, but the idea can also be extended to ultimate knowledge. If existence in *māyā* entails the existence of the self without knowledge, then we have to admit that the locus of knowledge is in

[45] Roychoudhury (1955), p. 78.
[46] Roychoudhury (1955), p. 80.
[47] Mohanty, J.N. (2000), 'Knowledge and Ignorance', in J.L. Shaw (ed.), *Concepts of Knowledge East and West*, p. 213.

the self. Knowledge and its negation cannot simultaneously exist in the self, for they are contradictory; it is impossible to be both with and without knowledge of a particular thing. *Māyā*, therefore, cannot be the negation of all knowledge, because without knowledge we cannot know what is there to be negated.

We have thus shown that *māyā* should not be thought of as a negative entity. It is positive in that is it not unreal like a hare's horn. If *māyā* were completely negative, it would not be experienced at all; but clearly it is, since the world is experienced by all. Experience is substantially-positive, and a substantially-negative entity cannot be the cause of something substantially-positive. It must be said of *māyā*, therefore, that it has phenomenal reality. Śamkara's *māyāvada* has often been disregarded as an unrealistic, illusory doctrine that cannot solve our material problems. What we have shown in this section, however, is that his *māyāvada* is not world-denying, but rather non-dual. The world is neither Real nor unreal. Nayak asks: "where does [Śamkara's] greatness lie?"[48] The answer is found in his subtle, sophisticated *māyāvada*, which explains how the perfect *Brahman* is non-different from, and manifested in, the imperfect material world. We believe that we have provided sufficient grounds to consider *māyāvada* as a legitimate and positive concept. *Māyā* is the source (manifested by *Brahman*) of all material life and experience.[49] Moreover, there is sufficient evidence to assert

[48] Nayak, G.C. (1978), *Essays in Analytical Philosophy*, p. 86.
[49] As the manifesting power of the world, *Brahman* is usually referred to as *Iśvara*, which is most accurately described as the personal God. *Iśvara* contains the power (*śakti*) of manifestation which is released during Its time of playfulness (*līlā*). As *Brahman* is compared to the material world, *Iśvara* is compared to the *jīva*, or individual soul. The *jīva* is the personal self which is to be distinguished from the ultimate self (*Ātman*). Ignorance arises when the *jīva* is mistakenly believed to be the ultimate self, which is actually the *Ātman*. Thus the *Iśvara*-*jīva* distinction explains the epistemological manifestation of the One as the many, just as the *Brahman*-world distinction explains the ontological manifestation of the One as the many. *Iśvara* is the personal god which is conceived of by the subjective *jīva*, or *ātman*. Hence knowledge of *Iśvara* is not

that Śamkara's *māyāvada* avoids any description of the world in terms of illusion or unreality. Hence we may correctly interpret this most famous of Śamkaran passages:

> *ślokārdhena pravaksyāmi yad uktam granthakotibhih*
>
> *brahma satyam jagan mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparah.*
>
> With half a *śloka* I will declare what has been said in thousands of volumes:
>
> *Brahman* is Real, the world is false, the soul is only *Brahman*, nothing else.[50]

These three assertions are the cornerstone tenets of Advaita philosophy. The first and third assertions, namely that *Brahman* is ultimately Real, and non-different from the *Ātman*, are easy to understand, at least conceptually, and pose no problem for this paper. It is the second assertion – 'the world is false' – that has led many to misinterpret Śamkara's *māyāvada*. Indeed it appears on the surface to contradict our thesis. The use of the word false (*mithyā*) seems to imply that Śamkara considers the world to be unreal. But we contend that there is another way to read this passage. What Śamkara really means when he states that the world is *mithyā* is simply that it is not ultimately Real like *Brahman*. Another interpretation of *mithyā* is 'not in reality', and we hold that the reality referred to by Śamkara is the ultimate Reality. Thus the fact that the world is *mithyā* means that it is not Real, because it is finite, temporal, and can be contradicted or denied. There is another special term for the falsity of the world as expressed here: *anirvacanīya* (unutterable, indescribable). So the phenomenality of the world is

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ultimate, whereas knowledge of *Brahman* is. Comprehension of *Iśvara* and the *jīva* is the first step towards the understanding of *Brahman* and the *Ātman*.

[50] Śamkara, in Richard Brooks (1969), 'Some Uses and Implications of Advaita Vedānta's Doctrine of *Māyā*', in M. Sprung (ed.), *Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*, p. 385.

indescribable, but not unreal. What is indescribable is *māyā*, the process by which *Brahman* is manifested as the world. We shall discuss this point in detail below. Muller states: “For all practical purposes, the [Advaitin] would hold that the whole phenomenal world, both in its objective and subjective character, should be accepted as real. It is as real as anything can be to the ordinary mind”.[51] Hence we may conclude that Śamkara’s *māyāvada* attributes to the world a qualified reality, in that we experience it, but it is sublated when ultimate knowledge is attained.

In this section we have explained the Advaitic conceptions of unchanging *Brahman* and the changing material world, and shown the need for a doctrine to account for the relationship between the two. We have argued that the Śamkaran metaphysic holds the world to be real. To hold the world to be unreal, then, cannot be consistent with the Advaitin position, since Śamkara is almost always credited with its conception. Let us now go further back in time, to the *Upanishads*, and forward, to the Neo-Vedantins, to see if they are in agreement with our position thus far.

[51] Muller, F. Max (1894), *Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy*, p. 161.

3 Evidence for World-Affirming *Māyāvada*

This section examines two very important sources of information regarding *māyāvada*: the *Upanishads* and Neo-Vedānta. The former is the group of texts written between circa 800 and 400 B.C.E. There are 108 *Upanishads* in total, of which around twelve are considered to be major. This section examines passages from *Śvetāśvatara*, *Mundaka*, *Katha*, *Īśāvāsya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, *Aitareya Āranyaka*, *Chāndogya*, and *Taittirīya Upanishads*, which are all major *Upanishads*. Neo-Vedānta is the general philosophy expounded by the Neo-Vedāntins, the most important and influential of which are Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo. All three are considered in detail in this section and section four. This section shall show that both the *Upanishads* and the Neo-Vedāntins support our claim that the preferable interpretation of *māyāvada* is that it affirms the reality of the world.

3.1 *Māyāvada* in the *Upanishads*

There are two questions to be considered regarding *māyāvada* in the *Upanishads*. The first asks: (1) is *māyāvada* is present in the *Upanishads*? We hold that it is, and shall argue for this conclusion below. Having taken this position, one more question arises, namely: (2) does the *Upanishadic māyāvada* posit a real or unreal material world? We claim that it posits a real material world, consistent with the *māyāvada* so far formulated in this paper, although in a somewhat less developed state.

When approaching question (1), we must note that our task is made more difficult by some confusing terminology. Radhakrishnan states that *māyāvada* is not

present in the *Upanishads*, and is instead “an *accidental* accretion to the [Vedāntic] system”.[52] This is most unlikely, since we find passages in the *Upanishads* such as the following from *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*:

> *māyām tu prakrtim viddhi, māyinam tu maheśvaram; tasyāvayava-bhūtais tu vyāptam sarvam idam jagat.*
>
> Know then *prakrti* (nature) is *māyā* (art), and the great Lord the *Māyin* (maker); the whole world is filled with what are his members.[53]

This passage directly refers to *māyā*, so either Radhakrishnan is mistaken, or there must be some variation in the terminology used here. It appears that Radhakrishnan is referring to world-denying *māyāvada* rather than its world-affirming counterpart. He is referring to the world-denying *māyāvada* that has been formulated by Deussen, Shāstrī, *et al*. These two theories of *māyā* are fundamentally different. The latter is based on a misunderstanding of Śamkara’s metaphysic. The correct *māyāvada* is one that maintains the reality of the world, and this is the *māyā* which is to be found in the *Upanishads*. Thus when Radhakrishnan claims that “the doctrine of *māyā* is not an integral part of the Vedānta system of philosophy”,[54] he is referring to world-denying *māyāvada*. He is correct, but only if we take *māyā* to be of the first variety, as he clarifies in the same passage: “To be consistent no Vedāntin should agree with the theory that the world is illusory…the Vedānta system is not acosmism”.[55]

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[52] Radhakrishnan (1914a), ‘The Vedānta Philosophy and the Doctrine of *Māyā*’, in *International Journal of Ethics* 24, p. 433.
[53] *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, IV. 10. Unless otherwise stated, all passages from the *Upanishads* are taken from Friedrich Max Muller (trans.) (1926), *The Upanishads*, parts I & II.
[54] Radhakrishnan (1914a), p. 451.
[55] Radhakrishnan (1914a), p. 451.

A search for *māyāvada* in the *Upanishads* might begin with a search for the word itself. But as Ranade asserts, "such a procedure is an entirely ridiculous one, in as much as it finds the existence of a doctrine like that of *māyā* in words rather than in ideas".[56] The concept of *māyā* is not always represented by the word *māyā*, especially in the earlier texts. For example, the word *māyā* can be found just once in the 555 *sūtras* of the *Vedānta Sūtra*,[57] despite the fact that this text is used by Śamkara to develop his *māyāvada*. Thus when we claim that *māyāvada* is present in the *Vedānta Sūtra*, the implication is that although the word *māyā* occurs just once in the 555 *Sūtras*, the *concept* of *māyā* occurs much more frequently.[58] To make a meaningful claim regarding *māyā* in the *Upanishads* we must examine the *ideology* of the text and then see if *māyāvada* is consistent with this ideology. When we search for *māyā* in the *Upanishads*, then, we search not for the word, but for the idea.

To show that *māyāvada* exists in the *Upanishads*, we shall go directly to the text and quote passages that we have identified as expressions of this theory. We begin with the idea that *Brahman* is present in all things, in *Mundaka Upanishad*:

> *brahmaivedam amrtam purastād brahma, paścād brahma, daksinataś cottarena adhaścordhvam ca prasrtam brahmaivedam viśvam idam varistham.*

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[56] Ranade, Ramchandra Dattatraya (1968), *A Constructive Survey of Upanishadic Philosophy*, p. 162.
[57] *Vedānta Sūtra*, III. 2. 3. Unless otherwise stated, all passages from the *Vedānta Sūtra* are taken from George Thibaut (trans.) (1926), *Vedānta-Sūtras: with the commentary by Sankaracarya*.
[58] Shāstrī, Prabhu Dutt (1911), *The Doctrine of Māyā*, p. 23.

> That immortal *Brahman* is before, that *Brahman* is behind, that *Brahman* is left and right. It has gone forth below and above; *Brahman* alone is all this, it is the best.[59]

If *Brahman* is the essence of all things, and we do not perceive this to be so, it must be due to ignorance that causes us to believe that all things are separate. The ontological cause of this is *māyā*. '*Brahman* alone' is the material world and all things in it, and our failure to realise this fact is due to *māyā*. Similarly, *Katha Upanishad* contains a famous passage:

> *yad eveha tad amutra, yad amutra tad anviha, mrtyos samrtyum āpnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati.*
>
> What is here (visible in the world), the same is there (invisible in *Brahman*); and what is there, the same is here. He who sees any difference here (between *Brahman* and the world), goes from death to death.[60]

The ultimate truth is that everything is one, and those who attain this knowledge achieve liberation (*mokśa*). Those who do not know the truth go 'from death to death', meaning that they are continuously reborn until they understand the unity of all things. This is an expression of *māyā*, the 'veil' which prevents us from attaining ultimate knowledge. Another clear assertion of the effect of *māyā* is found in *Īśāvāsya Upanishad*:

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[59] *Mundaka Upanishad*, II. 2. 11.

[60] *Katha Upanishad*, II. 4. 10. This idea is repeated in *Brihad-āranyaka Upanishad*, IV. 4. 19: "By the mind alone It [*Brahman*] is to be perceived, there is in It no diversity. He who perceives therein any diversity, goes from death to death".

> *hiranmayena pātrena satyasyāpihitam mukham tat tvam pūsan apāvrnu satyadharmāya drstaye.*
>
> The face of truth is covered by a golden disc. Unveil it, O *Pūsan*, so that I who love the truth may see it.[61]

The 'golden disc', of course, is *māyā*. The truth of *Brahman* as the sole entity, of which the world is its parts, is covered by *māyā*. This is similar to the metaphor that compares *māyā* to a veil that covers *Brahman*. To attain ultimate knowledge is to remove the veil or golden disc of *māyā*. *Brahman* manifests Itself through *māyā* to create the material world, as expressed in *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*:

> *māyām tu prakrtim viddhi, māyinam tu maheśvaram; tasyāvayava-bhūtais tu vyāptam sarvam idam jagat.*
>
> Know then *prakrti* [original matter] is *māyā*, and [*Brahman*] the *mayin*; the whole world is filled with what are Its members.[62]

The material world, then, is *Brahman* manifested as primal matter, as we have seen above. *Māyā* is the theory that describes *Brahman's* power of self-manifestation that results in the diversity and change of the world. Note that this passage is the first that we have identified that actually contains the word *māyā*, even though the above passages adequately describe its function. We can be quite sure – even with a limited number of examples – that *māyāvada* exists in the *Upanishads*. It has not reached its eventual level of complexity, however, and we may thus state that the *Upanishadic māyāvada* is still in its developmental stages,

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[61] *Īśāvāsya Upanishad*, 15 (trans. Radhakrishnan (1953), *The Principal Upanishads: With Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes*).
[62] *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, IV. 10.

a sort of 'proto-*māyāvada*'. Devanandan agrees, and with the following quote we move to the more contentious question (2), whether the *māyāvada* in the *Upanishads* is one that affirms the reality of the world:

> Nowhere in the entire literature of the *Upanishads*…is there any evidence of the teaching that the world of sensible things is all illusory. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that *Upanishadic* theory contradicts the *māyā* world-view. On the contrary, there are sufficient indications to show that several elements that later combined to form the doctrine are unmistakably present in all the *Upanishads*.[63]

In this period of *śruti* (revelation) the universe is not conceived of as illusory.[64] To argue for our conclusion that the *māyāvada* in the *Upanishads* affirms the reality of the material world, we shall first consider some arguments to the contrary. Our positive thesis, based on the text itself, shall serve as a refutation of these arguments which promote the world-denying *māyāvada*. The most ardent (and compelling) arguments for the unreality of the world are made by Deussen and Shāstrī. Deussen holds that *māyāvada* is nothing more than a theory of illusion. The phenomenal world, he claims, is an empty illusion, the knowledge of which cannot produce any knowledge of true Reality:

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[63] Devanandan, Paul David (1950), *The Concept of Māyā: An essay in historical survey of the Hindu theory of the world, with special reference to the Vedānta*, p. 58.
[64] Deutsch, Eliot and J.A.B. van Buitenen (1971), *A Source Book of Advaita Vedānta*, pp. 5-8. Note that while the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* have been labelled as *śruti*, Deutsch and van Buitenen maintain that in this instance revelation is not the word of God – rather it is held to be authorless. From where, then, does it come? The answer: "It is given with the world" (p. 5).

> This world is *māyā*, is illusion; it is not the very reality [which is]…a timeless, spaceless, changeless reality…and whatever is outside of this only true reality, is mere appearance, is *māyā*, is a dream.[65]

Moreover, he claims, this theory of illusion is an integral feature of the *Upanishads*, and is thus a fundamental part of Vedānta philosophy. Hence it is Deussen's belief that the *Upanishads*, and all philosophies based upon them, proclaim that the world is unreal; and that subjective experience is false:

> The *Upanishads* teach that this universe is not the *Ātman*, the proper 'Self' of things, but a mere *māyā*, a deception, an illusion, and that the empirical knowledge of it yields no *vidyā*, no true knowledge, but remains entangled in *avidyā* in ignorance.[66]

Thus Deussen claims that any experience or knowledge of the world does not lead one to the ultimate truth. In fact, such experience can actually result in one becoming *further* from the truth. In this sense the world has no relation to *Brahman*. We hold that this view is incorrect. Deussen misunderstands *māyāvada* both in the *Upanishads* and more generally. He uses, for example, the passages in *Katha* and *Śvetāśvatara Upanishads* quoted above as instances of "the emphatic denial of plurality" in the *Upanishads*.[67] These passages, however, do not deny the reality of the material world. Let us revisit them:

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[65] Deussen, Paul, in Dutt (1931), p. 34.

[66] Deussen, Paul (1906), *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, pp. 227-8. See also Shāstrī's argument (following page) regarding higher and lower knowledge in the *Upanishads*, where the 'truth' of the text is held to be disguised for the benefit of the 'ignorant masses'.

[67] Deussen (1906), p. 235. There are, of course, references to both dualism and non-dualism in the *Upanishads*. But Deussen is incorrect in asserting that there are passages (in the major *Upanishads*) that directly explain the material world as unreal, much less the two passages quoted in this paper.

> What is here, the same is there; and what is there, the same is here. He who sees any difference here, goes from death to death.[68]

> Know then *prakrti* [original matter] is *māyā*, and [*Brahman*] the *mayin*; the whole world is filled with what are Its members.[69]

The former passage makes two assertions, neither of which posits an illusory *māyā*: *Brahman* is the essence of all material things, and thus all material things are of the same essence; and to know this truth is to attain liberation (*mokśa*), and to be ignorant of it is to believe that the parts constitute the whole. Hence the error that results in going 'from death to death' is not in mistaking the unreal for the real, but rather in mistaking the part for the whole. Subjective experience is not illusory, but instead is the experience and vision of the parts, not the whole. This, we maintain, is the message of this passage.

The latter passage attributes the existence of matter to *māyā*. *Māyā* explains the self-manifestation of *Brahman* as the material world. It does not explain the creation of unreal experience. This passage simply states that *māyā* is the explanation of the manifestation of *Brahman* as the world, and that *Brahman* is the *māyin* (controller of *māyā*). This does not contradict the *māyāvada* held in this paper. Deussen is therefore mistaken in his assertions regarding *māyā* in the *Upanishads*.

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[68] *Katha Upanishad,* II. 4. 10.
[69] *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad,* IV. 10.

Shāstrī states that our interpretation of these passages is nothing more than a concession to popular belief. He claims that the 'ignorant masses' are not able to accept the unreal nature of the world, which is the true message of the *Upanishads*. To appease the masses the *Upanishads* affirm the reality of the world while at the same time positing the ultimate Reality of *Brahman*:

> This extreme idealism, which refused to grant reality to the world, seemed to be rather too advanced for the ordinary understanding… It was possible to [resolve this problem] by granting the existence of the world and yet maintaining at the same time that the sole reality is *Ātman*.[70]

But this explanation does not make much empirical sense. If the assertion of the reality of the world is just a concession to the masses, then it is not clear why it is emphasised again and again, in almost every *Upanishad*. The *Upanishadic* authors were not restricted by authority, and were not obliged to include what they believed to be untenable positions in their works.[71] Shāstrī himself admits that "the doctrine of *māyā* is the pivotal principle in the Advaita philosophy – the final pronouncement of Indian speculation on the conception of Reality and Appearance".[72] Surely, then, the authors of the *Upanishads* would not compromise their most important point. Shāstrī's claim is not consistent with the empirical evidence at hand. It seems to us that Shāstrī has misunderstood *māyāvada*. He uses poor logic to argue for an illusory interpretation of *māyā*:

[70] Shāstrī, P.D. (1911), p. 67-8.
[71] If they were, then their messages would be much less significant, to the point where one would not have to go through this exercise of justifying a particular argument through their historical authority. Indian philosophies, however, stand and fall on their compatibility with the *Upanishadic* messages.
[72] Shāstrī, P.D. (1911), p. v.

> The theory [of *māyā*] may be enunciated in two ways: (1) That the world is an illusion or appearance, and (2) That the only reality is the *Ātman*. These two statements mean the same thing, so that the passages which emphasise the statement that the *Ātman* is the only reality mean most transparently that all else (i.e., other than the *Ātman*, viz., the world, etc.) is not real.[73]

All Advaitins agrees that the *Ātman* is *Brahman*, and that *Brahman* is the sole ultimate Reality. But it does not logically follow from these facts that the world is unreal.[74] World-affirming *māyāvada* asserts that *Brahman* is not exclusively real but rather *inclusively* real, in that all is contained within It. It is the whole which is prior to the part. In other words, that *Brahman* is Real and the world is real is not a contradictory statement. Shāstrī's logic does not hold here.

Moreover, the *Upanishadic* passages that he uses to support his claim fail to do so. Of *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* he states: "The burden of the whole [*Upanishad*] throughout is that 'the *Ātman* is the only reality', which at once implies that the world is not real".[75] This view fails to consider the two levels of reality which we have discussed above. There is the ultimate Reality of *Brahman*, which is independent and unchanging, and then there is the reality of the world, which is dependent and characterised by change. 'The *Ātman* is the only reality' means that It is the only Real thing; It is one without a second. To claim that this passage implies that *Brahman* is the only thing that is real is to fundamentally

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[73] Shāstrī, P.D. (1911), p. 49.

[74] We must question in what sense Shāstrī uses the term 'not real'. There are two possible meanings: not ultimately Real; or unreal. If he means the former, then we agree with his statement. But we believe he means the latter, as betrayed by his statement that "the world is an illusion or appearance". So by 'not real', he means not Real, to use the terminology developed in this paper. Hence our disagreement with his claim.

[75] Shāstrī, P.D. (1911), p. 50.

misunderstand the subtle message of Advaita. Shāstrī also appeals to the same passages as Deussen, but our objection remains the same. Neither provides sufficient reason or evidence to believe that the *Upanishadic māyāvada* is based on illusion or unreality.

Let us now present some reasons for believing that the *Upanishadic māyāvada* is consistent with world-affirming *māyāvada*. We begin with some secondary evidence. Bhandarkar states: "The opinion expressed by some eminent scholars that the burden of the *Upanishadic* teaching is the illusive character of the world…is manifestly wrong"[76]. Similarly, Hopkins asserts: "Is there anything in the early *Upanishads* to show that the authors believed in the objective world being an illusion? Nothing at all".[77] Colebrook, "the greatest of the first generation of historians of ancient India",[78] remarks: "The notion that the versatile world is an illusion…and every seeming thing is unreal and all is visionary, does not appear to be the doctrine of the text of the Vedānta. I have remarked nothing which countenances it in… I take it to be no tenet of the original Vedānta philosophy".[79] It seems, then, that we are not alone in our thoughts. Let us now examine the primary evidence.

Originally, the *Vedic* philosophers were driven by principles of causality to explain various natural phenomenon, such as why a red cow can produce white

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[76] Bhandarkar, R.G. (2001), *Vaisnavism, Śaivism and other Minor Cults*, p. 2.
[77] Hopkins, Thomas, in Devanandan (1950), p. 58.
[78] Ingalls, Daniel (1960), 'On the Study of the Past', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80, p. 191.
[79] Colebrook, H.T., in Radhakrishnan (1914a), p. 432.

milk, or why the sun does not 'fall down'.[80] The *Rig Veda* affirms the reality of the world, as Radhakrishnan explains:

> During the *Vedic* period, the universe in all its fullness was conceived as real… The demand of philosophy, *viz*., scientific knowledge of reality, led them to postulate a number of agents behind the diversity of things. But there is no suggestion here of the unreality of the universe.[81]

In the *Rig Veda* we see the emergence of unqualified non-dualism: "Sages name variously that which is but one (*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*)".[82] Similarly, in the *Aitareya Āranyaka*, part of the *Rig Veda*, the non-dualistic worldview is expressed in terms of ultimate knowledge: "Knowledge is *Brahman* (*prajñānam brahma*)".[83] *Brahman* is knowledge, and this knowledge is the understanding that everything in the universe is the manifested *Brahman*. Moreover, *Brahman* in this sense is not a corporeal presence that produces a world apart from Itself. It is eternally manifested in all things. It is not apart from the world since It *is* the world: "The world is the product of *Brahman*, and, therefore, *Brahman*. Hence, instead of being an illusion, the world is the sole reality".[84] The *Upanishadic* teaching is based on a central theme of unity, and this unity is *Brahman*. Since the Reality of *Brahman* is all-encompassing, it follows that the world a manifestation of *Brahman* must be (dependently) real.

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[80] *Rig Veda*, IV. 13. 5.
[81] Radhakrishnan (1914a), p. 434.
[82] *Rig Veda*, I. 164. 46.
[83] *Aitareya Āranyaka*, II. VI. 1. 7.
[84] Radhakrishnan (1914a), p. 437.

Upanishadic creation myths are also world-affirming. In the following passage from *Mundaka Upanishad*, *Brahman* is deemed to be the source of all things. The outcome of such creation is a non-dual universe:

> *etasmāj jāyate prāno manah sarvendriyāni ca, kham vāyur jyotir āpah prthivī viśvasya dhārinī. agnir mūrdhā, caksusī candra-sūryau, diśah śrotre, vāg vivrtāś ca vedāh; vāyuh prāno hrdayam viśvam, asya padbhyām prthivī hy esa sarva-bhūtāntarātmā.*
>
> From [*Brahman*] is born breath, mind, and all organs of sense, ether, air, light, water, and the earth, the support of all. Fire (the sky) is his head, his eyes the sun and the moon, the quarters his ears, his speech the Vedas disclosed, the wind his breath, his heart the universe; from his feet come the earth; he is indeed the inner Self of all things.[85]

Brahman is manifested in all things, which means that the material world is real, in that it is a manifestation of *Brahman*, and not an illusory appearance. It is consistent with our point that the world is the parts and *Brahman* is the whole. Both are real. The reality of the finite, then, is not denied. If we look at the individual parts, we shall observe change, but if we look at reality as a whole we shall see that there is also persistence through that change: "The wise who knows the Self [*Brahman-Ātman*] as bodiless within the bodies, as unchanging among changing things, as great and omnipresent, does never grieve (*aśarīram śarīresu, anavasthesv avasthitam, mahāntam vibhum ātmānam matvā dhīro na śocati*)".[86] That *Brahman* is included 'among' changing things surely denotes the real status of those things. There are many more *Upanishadic* passages that emphasise the

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[85] *Mundaka Upanishad*, II. 1. 3-4.
[86] *Katha Upanishad*, I. 2. 22.

non-duality of *Brahman* and the world. Three more shall suffice to confirm our thesis, beginning with *Chāndogya Upanishad*:

> *yathā, saumya, ekena mrt-pindena sarvam mrnmayam vijñātam syāt, vācārambhanam vikāro nāma-dheyam, mrttikety eva satyam.*
>
> My dear, as by one clod of clay all that is made of clay is known, the difference being only a name, arising from speech, but the truth being that all is clay.[87]

Hence the finite world is not an illusion, but is rather a real modification of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the causal substance of the finite world, just as clay is the causal substance of a clay pot. This example does not state that the effect is unreal, or that the process which transforms the cause into the effect is unreal. The material world is not unreal, but rather is conditioned, unlike *Brahman*, and is thus attributed a lesser degree of reality. The world depends on *Brahman*, and its own reality is assured by said dependence. The two central tenets which verify the reality of the world are the self-manifestation of *Brahman* as the world and the one-sided dependence of the world upon *Brahman*, which we shall examine in detail in the following section. We quote another passage from *Mundaka Upanishad*:

> *tad etat satyam: yathā sudīptāt pāvakād visphulingāh sahasraśah prabhavante sarūpāh tathāksarād vividhāh, saumya, bhāvāh prajāyante tatra caivāpi yanti.*
>
> This is the truth. As from a blazing fire sparks, being like unto fire, fly forth a thousand-fold, thus are various beings brought forth from the Imperishable, my friend, and return thither also.[88]

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[87] *Chāndogya Upanishad*, VI. 1. 4.

Sparks from a fire are caused by the fire and are real. Similarly, the world is caused by *Brahman* and is real. Not only is the world caused by *Brahman*, it is part of *Brahman*, as illustrated by the idea that it can 'return thither'. Moreover, without fire there can be no sparks, so the world is dependent upon *Brahman*. As we have noted above, this dependence confirms its reality. There are two levels of Advaitin reality; independent (*Brahman*) and dependent (the world). Neither is unreal. 'This is the truth' of the *Upanishads*. We now arrive at what may be the simplest possible declaration of our thesis, from *Taittirīya Upanishad*:

> *annam brahmeti vyajānāt.*
>
> He knew that matter is *Brahman*.[89]

Matter is *Brahman*. If matter were unreal, it could not be *Brahman*, for being everything, there is nothing that *Brahman* is not. Ultimate Reality has nothing in common with unreal things. To quote Vivekananada: "we find that the effect is never different from the cause".[90] The only remaining path for the world-denier, then, is to deny the reality of *Brahman*, for it cannot be that *Brahman* (or the world) is both real and not real. But to deny the reality of *Brahman* is to entirely divorce oneself from the Advaitic system. The fundamental concept of this philosophy is that *Brahman* is the One. To deny the reality of the whole is to deny the reality of all things, both concrete and abstract. This, surely, is an untenable position. We hold, therefore, that to be consistent the Advaitin should

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[88] *Mundaka Upanishad*, II. 1. 1.
[89] *Taittirīya Upanishad*, III. 2, trans. Radhakrishnan (1953).
[90] Vivekananda (1999), I, p. 206.

admit the reality of the material world, and that *Brahman* is its substratum. Now let us consider the *māyāvada* of the Neo-Vedāntins.

3.2 *Māyāvada* in Neo-Vedānta

In this part of the section we introduce the general conceptions of *māyā* held by Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo. As Neo-Vedāntins, their self-appointed task is to rejuvenate Advaita so that it is applicable to our lives today. All three reject the ascetic ideal, arguing instead for a balanced metaphysical and social outlook that incorporates both matter and spirit.

3.2.1 Swami Vivekananda

It is difficult to analyse Vivekananda's general ontological outlook; more so his conception of *māyā*. He is most certainly a philosopher, but he focuses primarily on social action, not metaphysics. Moreover, many of his works are transcribed seminars; hence we are often faced with language and theories that have been simplified for a Western audience. However he still talks at length about metaphysical concepts such as *Ātman*, *Brahman*, and *māyā*, especially in his *Jñāna-Yoga*.

Vivekananda's conception of *māyā* – found primarily in his doctrine of Oneness – adheres closely to that of Śamkara. The non-difference of the One and the many, or 'universal Oneness', is central to Vivekananda: "that which exists is one, but sages call it by different names (*ekam sadviprā bahudhā vadanti*)";[91] "this is the

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[91] Vivekananda, in J.L. Shaw (2004), *Swami Vivekananda: As a Philosopher*, p. 6.

great theme of the Vedānta, this Oneness of life, this Oneness of everything”.[92] Vivekananda claims that the material world is neither ultimately Real nor unreal: it is not Real because it is temporally limited; it is not unreal because we perceive and experience it. The material world exists only for the soul that is materially bound; the liberated soul has no existence except as *Brahman*. Das Gupta remarks: “[Vivekananda] integrates the idea of a supreme Reality with the idea of *māyā*, and finds [*Brahman*] in both”.[93] Our above argument has shown that Śamkara’s *māyāvada* is not a theory of unreality or illusion. Vivekananda echoes this sentiment, and develops it further with his theory of universal Oneness which he hopes shall promote compassion and unification in the material world, in this lifetime:

> As so many rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down, crooked or straight, and at last come into the ocean – so, all these various creeds and religions, taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come unto [*Brahman*].[94]

Through his theory of Practical Vedānta, Vivekananda claims that there is value in action in the material world. He is able, therefore, to transform Śamkara’s metaphysical description of the world into a philosophy of action and duty. Advaitin ethics and metaphysics are inextricably linked; one cannot comprehend Vivekananda’s thesis of Oneness without first understanding its ontological roots, which are to be found in *māyāvada*. It is to this task, then, that we now turn.

[92] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 153.
[93] Das Gupta R.K. (1955), *Swami Vivekananda’s Vedāntic Socialism*, p. 126.
[94] Vivekananda (1999), I, p. 390.

Similar to Śamkara, Vivekananda proposes a relative *māyāvada* based on an epistemological distinction:

> [The material universe] has no absolute existence. It exists only in relation to my mind, to your mind, and to the mind of everyone else… It has, therefore, no Real existence; it has no unchangeable, immovable, infinite existence. Nor can it be called non-existence, seeing that it exists, and we have to work in and through it.[95]

Thus Vivekananda agrees with Śamkara that the material universe is phenomenally real. Again, existence in *māyā* is neither Real nor unreal. Life in *māyā* is an interactive experience, in that *māyā* exists because of our senses, and our senses allow us to feel and describe it. The material world has essence, but its essence is not Real like *Brahman*. Rather, it is based on our senses; senses that are not capable of perceiving the ultimate Reality. Hence not only is *māyā* related to our senses; but moreover its presence is *due* to those very senses that we so faithfully follow in our material lives. Its existence is relative to our mind and our perception of it; and something that is relative to our mind cannot be known by that mind. It is logically impossible for the material mind to comprehend *māyā*, for *māyā* ebbs and flows with the mind's perception of it – always slightly out of reach, as it were. Consequently Vivekananda supports our assertion that the illusory interpretation of *māyāvada* is incorrect:

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[95] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 91.

> Generally it is used, though incorrectly, to denote illusion, or delusion, or some such thing…so that when the universe is said to be *māyā*, that also has to be explained as being illusion… [This interpretation] is neither happy nor correct.[96]

According to Vivekananda, then, *māyā* is not illusory. Nor is it Real, because although we may acquire knowledge and so on, our acquisitions can only reach a certain point since we are limited by our own finite minds. We are physically bound to the realms of space and time, so all material objects have a beginning and an end. In Advaita only that which is eternal is Real, and the only thing that is eternal is *Brahman*. All existence is the manifested *Brahman*, and yet while we are bound to *māyā* we will never realise this truth because of our material limitations. *Māyā* is defined by name and form (*nāmarūpa*). *Brahman-Ātman*, however, is infinite and formless. This is Vivekananda's *māyāvada*.

Compared to Śamkara, Vivekananda's *māyāvada* is more practical, in the sense that we can see how it works in our everyday lives. Life in *māyā* is contradictory – good comes with bad, happiness with suffering – but "the great secret revealed by this analysis", asserts Vivekananda, "is that good and bad are not two cut-and-dried, separate existences… The only way to stop evil, therefore, is to stop good also; there is no other way. To stop death, we shall have to stop life also".[97] There are two options regarding all dichotomies: reject both sides (the ascetic route); or embrace both. The Neo-Vedāntins prefer the latter, since they denounce asceticism in favour of a more balanced spiritual progress, where one may spiritually transcend the world, while materially remaining part of it, as

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[96] Vivekananda (1999), II, pp. 88, 105.
[97] Vivekananda (1999), II, pp. 97-8.

expressed by the term *jīvanmukti* (emancipation while still alive). Hence according to Vivekananda Advaita is not confined to the *sanyassin*, or ascetic. There are other goals in life as well as enlightenment: “Knowledge of the Vedānta has been hidden too long in caves and forests… [We must] carry it into the midst of family and social life… The drum of the Advaita shall be sounded in all places, in the bazaars, from the hill-tops, and on the plains”.[98]

To achieve this goal, Vivekananda argues that there is merit in action from within *māyā*, in that we may improve our lives and the lives of others both materially and spiritually. To prove this point we must examine in more detail Vivekananda’s idea of Oneness, which we shall do in section four. Vivekananda’s Oneness holds that the phenomenal world is a manifestation of *Brahman* and therefore all things are of the same *real essence*, which in turn confirms their reality.

3.2.2 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

Radhakrishnan also insists that the material world is real as a manifestation of Reality affected by our subjective intellectual limitations. The higher and lower levels of reality are fundamentally different in that one is characterised by permanence and infinity, the other by change and form. Hence only one, namely the higher level, is ultimately Real. *Brahman* is unequivocally Real, whereas the phenomenal world is neither Real nor unreal. The abstract or ontological expression of the phenomenality of the material world is *māyā*:

[98] Vivekananda, in Nityananda Mishra (2001), ‘Swami Vivekananda’s Advaita and His Mission of Social Service’, in Santinath Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Swami Vivekananda: His Global Vision*, p. 110.

> If we get beyond the distinctions of places, moments and events, it is said, the world of diversity will collapse into a single unit… The [R]eal is what is present at all times… The world of experience is not present at all times and is therefore [comparatively] not [R]eal.[99]

Brahman and the world are non-different. The former is the base of the latter. But Radhakrishnan points out that *Brahman* both *is and is not* identical with the world: it is identical because the world cannot exist apart from *Brahman* (*Brahman* is the locus of *māyā*); and it is not identical because *Brahman* is not subject to those things which characterise the world, such as change, form, and finitude.[100] The most important point is that Reality (*Brahman*) and appearance (the world) are one and the same, but *Brahman* is not the sum of the things in the world. *Brahman is* the world, since when we know *Brahman* all ignorance is instantly sublated. Questions about the world arise due to our subjective ignorance. Consequently Radhakrishnan holds that *avidyā* is the subjective cause of *māyā*. We erroneously accept the phenomenal world for the Reality of *Brahman*, of which it is merely the effect:

> The cause of the appearance of the world is to be sought in the nature of the intellect, and not in that of *Brahman*. *Brahman* exists entire and undivided in the smallest object, and the appearance of plurality is due to the intellect which works according to the laws of space, time and causality.[101]

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[99] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, pp. 561-2.
[100] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 566.
[101] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 574.

In other words, the appearance of the world as Real is due to our subjective ignorance. When knowledge sublates ignorance, the phenomenal world is seen for what it really is. *Avidyā* is not negative in character, but rather is positive, because the phenomenal world (the many) is a manifestation of *Brahman* (the One). *Avidyā* is a universal problem; our knowledge is always limited. Universal ignorance is the personal explanation of *māyā*.

Radhakrishnan affirms the reality of the material world. Citing Śamkara, he holds that *Brahman* is the base of the phenomenal world, as we have discussed above, and is thus non-different from it. His motivation for arguing for the reality of the world is summarised thus:

> If *Brahman* were absolutely different from the world…then the repudiation of the reality of the world…cannot lead us to the attainment of truth. We shall then have to embrace nihilism and treat all teachings as purposeless.[102]

Brahman cannot be absolutely different from the phenomenal world, for if this were the case the embracement or rejection of one could not lead to knowledge of the other. But knowledge of one *does* lead to knowledge of the other, so it must be concluded that *Brahman* and the world are non-different. Reality and unreality have absolutely nothing in common, in that the former exists, while the latter does not. Thus if *Brahman* is Real, the world cannot be unreal, for the world is a manifestation of *Brahman*. Radhakrishnan cites the rope-snake analogy to illustrate his point:

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[102] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 582.

> The illusory snake does not spring out of nothing, nor does it pass into nothing when the illusion is corrected. The root of the illusion is logical and psychological, and not metaphysical. *The pluralistic universe is an error of judgement.* Correction of the error means change of opinion. The rope appears as a snake, and when the illusion is over, the snake returns to the rope. So does the world of experience become transfigured in the intuition of *Brahman*. The world is not so much negated as reinterpreted.[103]

The word illusion is used here, but it is not of the type that would presuppose an unreal world. Rather, it is based on psychological error; the phenomenal world arises because of an error of judgement. The error is in mistaking the part for the whole, and not in mistaking the unreal for the real. The concept is one of reinterpretation, or change of perspective, rather than total unreality. Thus the difference between *Brahman* and the world is one of degree, not kind. When we understand the truth of *Brahman*, the world is not entirely negated. It is instead understood in a different light, in that we note that distinction and change are due to subjective experience and not objective truth. The world is real, but is only a part of that which is ultimately Real, and although the former is sublated with knowledge of the latter, it is not entirely negated in the same way that the illusory snake is in the analogy. The world is a lesser representation of *Brahman*, and this in no way implies any unreal status. Moreover, if the world is to be regarded as unreal we "shall have to repudiate *all* reality, even that of *Brahman*"[104]. Hence the reality of the phenomenal world confirms the Reality of *Brahman*, so that if the world is not real, then neither is *Brahman*. The Advaitin cannot deny the

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[103] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, pp. 582-3. Emphasis added. We have included a more detailed discussion of the rope-snake analogy in section 6.1.
[104] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 583. Emphasis added.

Reality of *Brahman*, as we have mentioned, so must therefore accept the reality of the world.

A real cause must produce a real effect. In the rope-snake analogy, the snake is illusory because it is a product of mistaken vision. Similarly, if one shines a yellow light on a white wall, it will appear yellow. This is illusion. Radhakrishnan does not deny illusion as a concept, but rather that the phenomenal world is of this type. The world exists, but is in some sense *less* real than *Brahman*. If the world is not unreal, then *māyā* does not produce illusion, and is itself not illusion.

3.2.3 Sri Aurobindo

Aurobindo's theory of *māyā* supports his belief in human evolution. We must move, he says, constantly and inevitably towards the 'Supermind'; the physical manifestation of the *Brahman* in the material world. The Supermind represents the supreme synthesis of *Brahman* and the world; according to Aurobindo matter is real, and thus to attain enlightenment one must fully comprehend both the material and the spiritual realms. The Supermind and its bearer, the 'Superman', confirm the reality of the material world, for they represent the manifestation of ultimate Reality in the finite world. In this way the ideals of the materialist and the ascetic are rejected by Aurobindo in favour of a harmonious balance of matter and spirit.

Aurobindo's ontological outlook is unique among Advaitins. It is revolutionary, progressive, and based on evolution, but not always well-understood: "the

philosophy of Aurobindo is like a beautiful but somewhat inaccessible island in the river of Indian thought".[105] He asserts the divinity of matter as a manifestation of *Brahman*. Hence the realisation of *Brahman* may only occur with the simultaneous realisation of the divinity of matter as well. We must note that Aurobindo does not reject Śamkara's "remarkable spiritual philosophy".[106] They have more in common than not, and the former regularly pays homage to the latter in his writings.[107] It is, however, the opinion of the Neo-Vedāntin that philosophy and religion must be strengthened by adapting to the times. Hence Śamkara's philosophy must be changed to suit our changing needs if it is to survive and prosper. *Brahman*, of course, cannot change with history. What Aurobindo wants to reconstruct, however, is our perception of the world, so that we may see the divinity of matter and all life, not just the distinction between Real and unreal. Aurobindo claims that the supreme manifestation of being-consciousness-bliss is necessarily the unification of the material and spiritual worlds; the mergence of *Brahman* and matter:

> As in science, so in metaphysical thought, that general and ultimate solution is likely to be the best which includes and accounts for all, so that each truth, as experience, takes its place in the whole.[108]

Aurobindo's approach, then, is holistic in nature, based on the realisation of both matter and spirit, and not the mere rejection of the latter for the former: "The fundamental idea upon which the whole structure of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy

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[105] Naravane, V.S. (1964), *Modern Indian Thought: A Philosophical Survey*, p. 203.
[106] Aurobindo (1951), p. 415.
[107] See Aurobindo (1951), p. 415: "Two of the greatest [Indian] thinkers [are] Buddha and Śamkara".
[108] Aurobindo, in Iyer (1964), p. 75.

rests is that matter as well as spirit is to be looked upon as real".[109] Note also the comparison between philosophy and science in the above statement. Even in science, the study of the physical world, we may find a general solution that accounts for all phenomena. In other words, "nature is secret God".[110] Aurobindo's holistic approach transcends the realm of the spirit to claim that even the material world is subject to the inherent unity that is *Brahman*.

Consequently, of course, the universe is real. Fundamental to Aurobindo's *māyāvada* is the idea of an evolving consciousness; that the material world represents a progression of spiritual enterprise that is not always evident to those who experience it. Those who renounce the world, who claim that material life is unreal, are neglecting one of two fundamental assertions made in classical Vedānta:

> We perceive that in the Indian ascetic ideal the great Vedāntic formula, 'One without a second', has not been read sufficiently in the light of that other formula equally imperative, 'All this is the *Brahman*'.[111]

In other words, while *Brahman* is peerless in that It is infinite, formless, and Real, it is also true that all things are manifestations of *Brahman*, so must contain at least some of Its original Reality. That Brahman is one without a second does not contradict the reality of the world. Some Advaitins forget this truth, as Aurobindo declares:

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[109] Maitra, S.K. (1965), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 1.
[110] Chattopadhyaya, D.P. (1973), 'Integral Sociology of Sri Aurobindo,' in Kishor Gandhi (ed.), *The Contemporary Relevance of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 123.
[111] Aurobindo (1951), p. 24.

> The passionate aspiration of man upward to the Divine has not been sufficiently related to the descending movement of the Divine leaning downward to embrace eternally Its manifestation. Its meaning in Matter has not been so well understood as Its truth in the Spirit. The Reality which the *Sannyasin* [ascetic] seeks has been grasped in its full height, but not, as by the ancient Vedāntins, in its full extent and comprehensiveness.[112]

When we compare this passage with one of Śamkara's quoted above – 'the descent of spirit is only apparent and not real' – we may see the fundamental difference between the two philosophers. Śamkara asserts that the material world is non-different from *Brahman,* but does not go so far as to say that these two entities are one and the same. Conversely, Aurobindo holds that there is divinity in both matter and spirit, as Minor asserts: "[For Aurobindo] the phenomenal world is real. It is real as an eternal manifestation of the Absolute… The One and the many are both real".[113] *Brahman* cannot temporally cause the world, as It is beyond all action, and exists independently of space-time, as described by the concept of *vivartavāda*. Thus either there is no relation whatsoever between *Brahman* and the world, or *Brahman* is eternally *manifested* as the world. The latter explanation is the choice of the Neo-Vedāntin. Aurobindo himself states that *Brahman* is eternally manifested in the world, confirming the reality of the world:

[112] Aurobindo (1951), p. 24.
[113] Minor, Robert Neil (1978), *Sri Aurobindo: The Perfect and the Good,* p. 81.

> If Unity is eternal and unchangeable, duality is persistently recurrent. The Spirit is infinite, illimitable, eternal; and infinite, illimitable, eternal is its stress towards manifestation, filling endless space with innumerable existences.[114]

Hence although the material world is characterised by change, and in this sense is different from the unchanging *Brahman*, it is real because *Brahman* is constantly and eternally manifested in it: "The One is for ever, and the many are for ever because the One is for ever".[115] This truth is hidden by the deceptive *māyā*. At the beginning of this paper we asked how something perfect can be manifested in the imperfect world. It can be so because *Brahman's* manifestation is the constant in the material world. Material change, then, is a mere superficiality.

In this section we have outlined the general conception of *māyā* in the *Upanishads* and Neo-Vedānta. Although they are separated by vast quantities of time, both maintain the reality of the material world. Hence we have strong primary evidence that world-affirming *māyāvada* is the preferable interpretation of this doctrine. Now let us develop a synthetic Neo-Vedāntic *māyāvada* to comprehensively show that the Advaitic universe must be real.

[114] Aurobindo, in Minor (1978), p. 81.
[115] Aurobindo, in Minor (1978), pp. 81-2.

4 Four Features of the Neo-Vedāntic *Māyāvada*

In this section we identify four features of *māyā*, none of which include the production or maintenance of an unreal world. Together these four features form the Neo-Vedāntic *māyāvada*. *Māyā* cannot be explained by just one feature, so we must make do with several, as long as they do not contradict each other: "different significations [of *māyā*] are not irreconcilable, though confusion will result if we do not carefully distinguish them".[116] The four features should form a necessary and sufficient description of *māyā*. They are: self-limitation of *Brahman*; inexplicable mystery; one-sided dependence; and concealment of *Brahman*. For each feature, we shall explain the particular positions of Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo, in that order.

4.1 Self-Limitation of *Brahman* (*māyā*^{I})

Māyā^{I} is the Neo-Vedāntin's answer to the problem of how the infinite *Brahman* is manifested as the finite world. Ultimate Reality becomes the world through limitation. Vivekananda explains *māyā*^{I} with the use of the following causal chain:

(a) The Absolute

(c)

Time

Space

Causation

(b) The [Material] Universe[117]

[116] Radhakrishnan (1923), I, p. 513.
[117] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 130.

The Absolute, or ultimate Reality (a), becomes the material universe (b) by 'passing through' time, space, and causation (c). *Māyā*, of course, is (c). This is the fundamental tenet of Advaitin metaphysics. As we have stated previously, *Brahman* is not characterised by time or space. *Brahman* is uncaused, and yet is the locus of all material existence. The power of self-limitation possessed by *Brahman* explains how It can be limited, for it is alone in Its infinity; It has no other. *Brahman* cannot be affected by anything but Itself, and we must thus conclude that time, space, and causation are also manifestations of *Brahman*. Time, space, and causation are used by *Brahman* to limit Itself to create the material world. Vivekananda does not develop this idea much further, but his opinion is clear, and is found to be very similar to the explanations given by Śamkara, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo. Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo expand upon this idea.

Māyā^{I} appears in Radhakrishnan as the 'self-becoming' of *Īśvara*, the lower form of *Brahman*. This is Radhakrishnan's interpretation of *ātmavibhūti*, which is literally a compound of *Ātman* and *vibhū*, meaning to arise, develop, manifest, or appear. Thus *ātmavibhūti* means the arising, developing, manifesting, or appearing of the ultimate Self. If we recall that the *Ātman* and *Brahman* are identical, then *māyā*^{I} is an explanation of how the One becomes the many, how Reality becomes reality:

> The personal *Īśvara* is said to combine within [Itself], *sat* and *asat*, the immutability of *Brahman* as well as the mutation of becoming. *Māyā* is the

> power which enables [It] to produce mutable nature. It is *śakti* or the energy of *Īśvara*, or *ātmavibhūti*, the power of self-becoming. *Īśvara* and *māyā* in this sense are mutually dependent and beginning-less. This power of the supreme is called *māyā*.[118]

This is not a theory of creation involving a separate deity. In this case there is no separate deity, for the material world is by definition non-different from ultimate Reality. *Īśvara* is the *representation* of *Brahman's* power of self-manifestation, as is *māyā* (*Īśvara* and *māyā* are mutually dependent and equally real). Shastri defines *Īśvara* as pure consciousness limited by *māyā* (*māyāvachinna caitanya*).[119] There is one pure consciousness and one *māyā*; hence there is one *Īśvara*. The phrase 'self-expression' has two meanings here: the above-mentioned power of self-manifestation; and the non-difference of the *Ātman* and *Brahman*. It thus states that one possesses, or more specifically one's *Ātman* possesses, the same power. Within ourselves, then, is the power used by *Brahman* to manifest the material world.

Since *Brahman* is ultimate Reality, all is contained within It. Hence if *Brahman* is to express Itself in the world, It must contain within Itself the power of self-expression; the power to divide and limit Itself into finite physical objects. *Māyā*[I] is therefore an integral feature of *Brahman*, for without *māyā* there could be no material existence, no manifestation at all. Moreover, if *māyā* were to be located in some place other than *Brahman*, then *Brahman* would not be the ultimate Reality, for by definition the ultimate Reality must contain within Itself

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118 Radhakrishnan (1948), p. 42.
119 Shastri, D.C. (1981), p. 35.

everything that exists: "*Māyā* is the objectifying of manifesting tendency. If the power of manifestation were excluded from the nature of the Absolute, it would not be the Absolute".[120] But *Brahman* does not depend upon *māyā* since It cannot be dependent on anything by virtue of Its Real status. All depends upon *Brahman*, but *Brahman* depends upon nothing but Itself. *Īśvara*, however, as the lower form of *Brahman*, is clearly dependent upon *māyā*. Thus *Īśvara* and *māyā* are mutually dependent.

Now we shall examine Aurobindo's *māyā*[I], which he uses to answer the following question: if the material world is a manifestation of the unchanging *Brahman*, then why is material perception characterised by duality and change? His answer is that perception of change in the world is created by insufficient knowledge of the process that manifests *Brahman* as the world:

> If [the material world] does not reveal to us in its forms and powers the Reality that it is…this must be not because it is unreal or because it is not all That, but because it is a progressive self-expression, a manifestation, an evolving self-development of That in Time which consciousness cannot yet see in its total or essential significance.[121]

In other words, the material world *is Brahman*; it is the living manifestation of the Infinite. That this is not blatantly obvious to us is because *Brahman's* self-manifestation is a 'progressive self-expression', that is, *Brahman* is manifested as (and throughout) time. The existence of *Brahman* within time is unfathomable in

[120] Radhakrishnan, in Donald A. Braue (1984), *Māyā in Radhakrishnan's Thought*, pp. 110-1.
[121] Aurobindo (1951), p. 416.

the same way that *Brahman* is, which we shall discuss below. We can see parts of Reality, but because of our subjective physical limitations, we cannot see all of it. The cause of this is our ignorance due to *māyā*.

Aurobindo also describes *māyā*[I] as the *descent* of the Infinite into the finite. It is a positive expression of the power of *Brahman*, and runs contrary to world-denying *māyāvada*. Thus the negative or life-rejecting impulse of the ascetic is spurned by Aurobindo in favour of his higher synthesis of re-affirmation. Chaudhury states that *māyā*[I] "is a factor in the transformation of the life impulse into active cooperation with the force of evolution, and the re-affirmation of the world as the field of increasing self-manifestation of [*Brahman*] in matter".[122] The descent of *Brahman* into matter is coupled with another function of *māyā*, which is the realisation, or 'ascent', of the *ātman* from its material enclosure to the knowledge of, and mergence with, the Infinite. These two functions of *māyā*[I] – the descent of *Brahman* and the ascent of the *ātman* – form what Aurobindo calls the higher *māyā*. Conversely, the lower *māyā* is the result of *avidyā* which causes us to confuse the many with the One.[123] The higher *māyā*, the self-manifestation of *Brahman*, is concealed by the mental play, or *avidyā*, of the lower *māyā*. To realise the higher *māyā*, one must first realise the lower; this progression of realisation is the natural, or at least preferable, evolution of the individual *ātman*. This theory of higher and lower *māyā* is a distinctive feature of Aurobindo's thought.

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[122] Chaudhury, Haridas, in Reyna (1962), p. 27.
[123] Aurobindo (1951), p. 137.

Again, *māyā*[I] explicitly affirms the reality of the material world, for all things are held to be none other than *Brahman* Itself: “The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real”.[124] Moreover, “all creation or becoming is *nothing but* this self-manifestation”.[125] A paradox may arise due to the fact that *Brahman* is simultaneously self-realised *and* self-realising. To address this, Aurobindo defines existence as two processes; the diversification of the One and the unification of the many. Hence the One and the many are both integral features of *Brahman*.[126] A paradox does not arise because, as we have explained in our discussion of Śamkara above, time and space are both manifestations of *Brahman* and not *vice versa*, so that *Brahman* does not exist within time and is not manifesting Itself as, say, a bud is manifested as a flower. Time is a product of *māyā*, and neither time nor *māyā* coexist with *Brahman*, for *Brahman* is one without another. Thus while *Brahman* manifests Itself *as* time, It does not manifest Itself *within* time. *Māyā* in this sense is logically consistent. Furthermore, the reality of the world confirms the Reality of *Brahman*, since the latter is the source of, and non-different from, the former:

> The pure existent is then a fact and no mere concept; it is the fundamental reality. But, let us hasten to add, the movement, the energy, the becoming are also a fact, also a reality… We have therefore two fundamental facts of pure existence and of world-existence, a fact of Being, and a fact of Becoming. To deny one or the other is easy; to recognise the facts of consciousness and find out their relation is the true and fruitful wisdom.[127]

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[124] Aurobindo (1953), *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and the Mother*, p. 159.
[125] Aurobindo (1951), p. 105. Emphasis added.
[126] Reyna (1962), p. 34.
[127] Aurobindo (1951), p. 74.

Hence it is possible to objectively observe *Brahman* through the world. The world must be part of *Brahman*, for if it were not, *Brahman* would not contain all things. So the two concepts are non-different: "While *Brahman* is appropriately understood designated as *saccidānanda*, *Brahman* is also supermind, mind, life, and matter. The cosmos is a working out of the being of *Brahman*. Without this manifestation, *Brahman* would not be the all".[128] Aurobindo holds that to deny the world is easy, and to deny the Infinite is easy, but to realise their relationship and understand the true nature of *māyā* is very difficult and represents ultimate knowledge. Being and becoming are equally real. Thus the one-sided world-views of both the materialist and the ascetic are denied, creating an integral metaphysic based on universal Oneness, which embraces the reality of *Brahman* and the world:

> There is here no such thing as the operation attributed to *māyā* in which there is no mimesis but a pure and radically original creation of unreal forms and movements that are non-existent anywhere and neither imitate nor reflect nor alter and develop anything discoverable in the Reality… A Reality of Oneness manifesting itself in a reality of numberless forms and powers of its being is what we confront everywhere.[129]

Aurobindo's metaphysical message is clear; the world, as the finite manifestation of *Brahman*, is real. Its existence is not paradoxical like 'P and not-P', and its finitude does not render it different from the Infinite. There is an Oneness of all

[128] Organ, Troy Wilson (1962), 'The Status of the Self in Aurobindo's Metaphysics – And Some Questions', in *Philosophy East and West* 12, p. 143.
[129] Aurobindo (1951), p. 388.

things, "the eternal unity of the One and the many".[130] This Oneness confirms the reality of the world and all material existence.

4.2 Inexplicable Mystery (*māyā*[ll])

Vivekananda contends that *Brahman* and *māyā* are inexplicable from within *māyā*. Our entire cognitive process is based on causal reactions. Everything in the material world is the effect of one or more causes, so when we want to know why something happens we look for its cause. Our minds function in this way. There is no action without reaction, and no reaction without action:

> A stone falls and we ask, why? This question is possible only on the supposition that nothing happens without a cause… This is called the law of causation and is a necessary condition of all our thinking. We believe that every particle in the universe, whatever it be, is in relation to every other particle… Interdependence is the law of the whole universe.[131]

Within *māyā* our cognition is determined by causality, both neurologically and metaphysically. Our minds are limited (non-infinite) and cannot overcome this limitation within *māyā*, since the former is the cause of the latter. Thus we can only hope to use our material minds to understand material things – things in the world – and not things that exist outside of the realm of causality. That without cause cannot be understood by the material mind which understands the laws of time and space only through causality. *Brahman* exists outside of causality, and so cannot be understood by the subjective intellect:

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[130] Aurobindo (1951), p. 336.
[131] Vivekananda (1999), II, pp. 131-2.

> In asking what caused the Absolute, what an error we are making! To ask this question we have to suppose that the Absolute also is bound by something, that It is dependent on something; and in making this supposition, we drag the Absolute down to the level of the universe. For in the Absolute there is neither time, space, nor causation; It is all one.[132]

Our subjective intellect cannot understand that which is uncaused. *Brahman* is uncaused. Therefore our subjective intellect cannot understand *Brahman*. Nor can it completely understand *māyā*, for *māyā* is the world as manifested *Brahman*. *Māyā* is the cause of time and space, and not subject to their effects. This means that *māyā* cannot be understood from within *māyā*. The infinite cannot be comprehended by the finite, and is thus unknowable: "[*Brahman*] cannot be known, [It] is always the Unknowable One".[133] To know *Brahman* is to be dissolved in It. Since no subject-object distinction is possible, the subjective intellect cannot comprehend *Brahman*.

Radhakrishnan agrees that Reality as a whole cannot be understood by the subjective intellect: "We do not and cannot know the why of this world".[134] He explains the inexplicability of *māyā* in the following way:

> The problem of the relation between *Brahman* and the world has meaning for us who admit the pure being of *Brahman* from the intuitive standpoint and demand an explanation of its relation to the world, which we see from the logical

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[132] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 132.
[133] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 133.
[134] Radhakrishnan (1923), I, p. 34.

> standpoint. We can never understand how the ultimate Reality is related to the world of plurality, since the two are heterogeneous, and every attempt at explanation is bound to fail. This incomprehensibility is brought out by the term *māyā*.[135]

If Reality is the cause of the world and yet unaffected by the events in that world, then an explanation of how Reality is manifested as the world is 'bound to fail', because of *māyā*. *Māyā*[II] is an epistemological feature rather than an ontological one. So *māyā* is used to explain the relationships between Reality and the phenomenal world and between *Ātman* and *ātman*. Since *Brahman* and *Ātman* are identical, the epistemological and ontological relationships describe the same concept. Thus the inexplicability in question applies not only to the manifestation of the Real in the subjectively real, but also more specifically to the manifestation of the ultimate Self in the phenomenal self.

We must note here that *mystery does not entail illusion*. When the unchanging Reality expresses itself in the changing world, the result is not an illusory state of affairs, but rather a manifestation, the nature of which is inexplicable:

> It is one thing to say that the secret of existence, how the unchangeable Reality expresses itself in the changing universe, without forfeiting its nature, is a mystery, and another to dismiss the whole changing universe as a mere mirage.[136]

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[135] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 573.
[136] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 463.

Just because we cannot explain a certain situation does not mean that the situation is unreal. In other words, the real, temporary, or illusory existence of a thing cannot be confirmed nor denied by virtue of our ability or lack thereof to adequately express or describe its nature. Our inability to express something follows directly from our inability understand it. Consequently Radhakrishnan places the two terms *inexplicable* and *anirvacanīya* in apposition.[137] *Anirvacanīya* is the verb 'to speak', preceded by the negative prefix '*a*', thus conveying the idea that something cannot be spoken (is inexpressible).[138] Because *māyā*^{II} is inexplicable, it is also inexpressible.

As well as creating the ontological *māyā*, *avidyā* also prevents us from being able to understand or explain it. Our inability to describe the phenomenal world and the subjective self is caused by our existence *within* that world, and hence shall continue for as long as we are bound by our subjectivity. The nature of *māyā* is unknowable for those who exist within it: "We are bound…to the rock of mystery by the chains of our finite mind".[139] *Māyā* will thus endure until we have "crossed the barrier of our limited intelligence",[140] at which time we shall see Reality for what It is.

To summarise, Radhakrishnan's *māyā*^{II} is an epistemological issue, based on the inherent subjective and finite nature of our worldly self. *Māyā* is inexplicable by virtue of the fact that our observation of it is made from within it. Moreover, *māyā* as mystery is entirely separate from *māyā* as illusion. Mystery arises when

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137 Radhakrishnan, in Schilpp (ed.) (1952), p. 800.
138 Braue (1984), p. 104.
139 Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 767.
140 Radhakrishnan, in Braue (1984), p. 106.

we do not know something, but the absence of knowledge does not require the absence of existence. To be ignorant of a particular thing is not to will that thing into non-existence. In other words, objects exist regardless of whether or not we know about them. The smoke of the world is a consequence of the fire of reality: there is no smoke without fire here!

Aurobindo also maintains that *Brahman* cannot be explained by the subjective intellect that resides within *māyā*. Similarly, *māyā* cannot be described by subjective knowledge either, due to the ignorance that it itself produces. First recall that we have shown *Brahman* to be inexplicable in terms of positive and negative description: "[*Brahman*] is describable neither by our negations, *neti-neti*…nor for that matter our affirmations…*iti-iti*".[141] Forms cannot be imposed onto *Brahman*, and yet *Brahman* is manifested in the world as a vast number of forms. So if *Brahman* is formless, and the world is characterised by different forms, does it not then follow that the forms of the world are not really *Brahman*? Aurobindo's response is that our inability to understand how *Brahman* can be both indeterminable and manifested as the determinable world is due to our subjective logic, based on dichotomies where a thing must either 'be' or 'not be'; and 'have' or 'not have' a particular quality. According to the Advaitin, things in the world are non-different from one another. And as we shall see shortly, the world is dependent upon *Brahman* but not *vice-versa*. *Brahman* is not limited by Its own manifestation of forms. Thus the essence of *Brahman* remains formless, even when It produces forms. In this way Aurobindo illustrates the inexplicable nature of *Brahman* from within the material world.

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[141] Aurobindo (1951), p. 383.

Māyā is also inexplicable, for it is the source of our ignorance. The world is dichotomous, and hence may be understood by dichotomous logic. Its source, however, cannot be explained by subjective knowledge, for it is the cause of that knowledge. Imagine two people in a windowless room. If Alvin turns off the light, Beatrix cannot see him. Only when she produces her own source of light will Beatrix be able to see Alvin and the method with which he turns off the light. *Māyā* functions in the same way. The cause of the ignorance (*avidyā*) can only be understood when the ignorance has been lifted. It is for this reason, as we have stated above, that the world is not ultimately Real, for it is sublated by true knowledge. So we know that the world is not Real, but exactly *why* this should be the case is concealed by the mystery of *māyā*.

We desire to understand existence, and yet it remains a mystery. We do not even know the essence of our own selves. Our limited and imperfect physical nature makes it impossible to know and describe that which is unlimited and perfect:

> The sources of our consciousness and thought are a mystery; the true nature of our mind, emotions, sensations is a mystery; our cause of being and our end of being, the significance of our life and its activities are a mystery; this could not be if we had a real self-knowledge and a real world-knowledge.[142]

Our subjective limitation is explained by the non-revealing quality (*tamah*) of *māyā*; concentration on the surface of existence which hides the true nature of things. An example of this is to mistake *ātman* for *Ātman*. Subjective

[142] Aurobindo (1951), p. 474.

consciousness is "a stream fleeting through time, oblivious of the sea behind it and of which it is only a narrow strip, a selection".[143] We can see the stream, but not the whole sea of which the stream is a part. Note, however, that the stream is just that, a part of the sea, and not something separate from it. This metaphor, therefore, confirms our thesis that the world is non-different from *Brahman*, and hence real. It is not the whole, but it is part of the whole, and thus of the same essence.

Aurobindo states that the subjective intellect errs in believing that it is possible to define *Brahman* in a negative sense, by defining what It is *not*.[144] This is erroneous because *Brahman* is the supreme positive; the cause of all positives, including material opposites. Objectively speaking, oppositions in the world are of the same nature; the negative of a certain positive also contains some force, some value. The negative, therefore, is not a 'nothing', but rather the outcome of worldly contradiction caused by nescient existence. *Brahman*, however, is not like worldly things. It is indefinable; even the concept of *sat-chit-ānanda* is inadequate. There is no negation of *Brahman* that can be defined in order to define its corresponding quality. Hence while we describe *Brahman* as *neti*, *neti* (not this, not that), we must also note that these are only indicators. More important is the understanding of *Brahman* as an end, the means to which are ethical thought and action. To neglect the prescriptive characterisation in favour of the negative is to "fall away from its truth".[145] A prescriptive assertion of *Brahman* is necessary to assert the reality of the world.

[143] Srivastava, Ripusudan Prasad (1973), *Contemporary Indian Idealism*, p. 99.
[144] Aurobindo (1951), p. 341.
[145] Aurobindo (1951), p. 341.

4.3 One-Sided Dependence (*māyā*III)

There are two points to be noted from the preceding discussion on *māyā*II. Firstly, the question 'what caused *Brahman*?' is a contradiction in terms; and secondly, we cannot objectify *Brahman*, because we are enveloped by Its over-arching Oneness.[146] In considering these points we move to *māyā*III, the one-sided dependence of the material world upon *Brahman*. *Māyā*, caused by *Brahman*, is the sum-total of space, time, and causation, and as such is the cause of the world. *Brahman* causes Itself to be manifested in the world with Its power of self-manifestation. Thus the world is an effect of *Brahman* due to *māyā*, and is dependent upon It for its existence. *Brahman*, however, is totally independent and free, and is not caused by another entity; much less the world. Time, space, and causation are dependent entities:

> In the first place time, space, and causation cannot be said to be independent existences. Time is entirely a dependent existence; it changes with every change of our mind… Secondly, the idea of time vanishes altogether, sometimes. So with space… So with causation.[147]

*Māyā*III confirms Vivekananda's doctrine of universal Oneness, for if there were more than one existence there would also be more than one absolutely independent entity. But according to Advaitic metaphysics *Brahman* is the only entity of this kind. Moreover, this theory confirms our hypothesis that the world is real as a part of *Brahman*, for it and *Brahman* are non-different. So the world exists, but due entirely to *Brahman*. The world is like a wave and *Brahman* like

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146 Vivekananda (1999), II, pp. 134-5.
147 Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 135.

the ocean. The wave is *of* the ocean; and yet it is different, due to the name and the form imposed onto it by the mind, which is the function of *māyā*. The wave cannot be separated from the ocean; if the ocean disappears, the wave will also disappear. But the wave and the ocean become non-different when name and form are sublated. Then the wave remains, but its essence is correctly established as ocean. Space and time cause the wave. Once they are no longer considered, the wave is ocean and nothing more.

Vivekananda explains *māyā*[III] by asserting that the 'light' of *Brahman* illuminates all existence: "[*Brahman*] shining, everything else shines. It is [*Brahman's*] light that they have borrowed, and [It] is shining through them".[148] *Māyāvada* is the theory that explains the self-manifestation of *Brahman* and the world. It is possible to see *Brahman* in all things, if we know how and where to look. Thus the world cannot be anything but real, because the manifestation of *Brahman* must be real. The world is *Brahman*: "Everything that you see, feel, or hear, the whole universe, is His creation, or to be a little more accurate, is His projection; or to be still more accurate, is [*Brahman*] Himself".[149] Note that this idea has been raised previously in our above discussion of *māyā* in the *Upanishads*: "He knew that matter is *Brahman*".[150]

Radhakrishnan also uses *māyā*[III] to explain *Brahman* as the base of the phenomenal world. The latter rests on the former, while the former in turn is not

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[148] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 183.
[149] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 211. Here the power of manifestation of *Brahman* is attributed to Its lesser form, *Īśvara*. Hence 'He' is used, rather that 'It'. *Īśvara* is the representation of *Brahman* as a personal God.
[150] *Taittiriya Upanishad*, III. 2.

affected in any way by this relationship. This one-sided causal relationship is explained by *māyā*^{III}:

> If *Brahman* is to be viewed as the cause of the world, it is only in the sense that the world rests on *Brahman*, while the latter is in no way touched by it, and the world which rests on *Brahman* is called *māyā*.[151]

The phenomenal world is completely dependent upon *Brahman*; this dependence, however, is not reciprocated. *Māyā*^{III}, then, explains why *Brahman* is ultimately Real while the phenomenal world is not:

> Since the world is only an effect of [*Brahman*], who is the cause and since everywhere the effect is less real than the cause, the world as effect is said to be less real than [*Brahman*] the cause… There is a struggle of opposites in the world of experience, and the Real is above all opposites.[152]

When Radhakrishnan holds that 'the cause is less real than the effect', he is distinguishing between transformation (*parināma*) and appearance (*vivarta*). Transformation is when, for example, milk is turned into yoghurt. In this case the effect is as real as the cause. With regards to appearance, however, the effect is less real than the cause. The world is somehow less real than *Brahman*, and so the former is an appearance of the latter. Brahman is unchanging; It cannot be transformed at the objective level. Radhakrishnan thus proposes that there are different degrees of reality, ranging from *Brahman* to inanimate objects. Things such as a hare's horn are excluded from reality altogether. To illustrate this point

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[151] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, pp. 573-4.
[152] Radhakrishnan (1952), I, p. 279.

we return to the rope-snake analogy, where the snake is an appearance, and as such is an effect of the more real rope. The illusion of the snake resides in the real rope just as the phenomenal world resides in the Real *Brahman*.[153] In both cases the former is *dependent* on the latter, but not *vice versa*. *Māyā*[III], then, is an ontological function which explains the higher reality held by the cause as compared to the effect, where the effect is an appearance. That is not to say that the effect is unreal – after all its cause is real – but it is certainly not as real as the cause.

Radhakrishnan identifies four different planes of reality: *Brahman*; *Īśvara*; *hiranyagarbha*; and *virāt*. *Brahman* as causal activity is *Īśvara*. *Īśvara's* power of self-becoming creates the world spirit (*hiranyagarbha*) and the material world (*virāt*). All four of these planes are real, though each is dependent on the planes that precede it – *Īśvara* is dependent on *Brahman*; while *hiranyagarbha* is dependent on *Brahman* and *Īśvara*, and so on. Only *Brahman* is Real, due to Its independence. Here we have the most concrete evidence of Radhakrishnan's assertion that the material world is real. Dependence does not entail unreality:

> We see, there is a great difference between this view, which ascribes reality – though a different reality – to the finite world, and the [world-denying] *māyā* view, which reduces it to an illusion. The world which our intellect reveals to us is real, though its reality is limited and partial. The finite world is not absolutely real, for it demands something else on which it depends.[154]

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[153] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 570.
[154] Radhakrishnan (1914a), p. 441.

Thus *māyā*[III] is a clear assertion that the material world is part of *Brahman* and hence real. Moreover, the world is completely dependent upon *Brahman*. Moreover still, in causing the world, *Brahman* is in no way affected. The dependence flows from top to bottom, but not *vice versa*.

Aurobindo's *māyā*[III] also refutes universal illusionism. Experience in *māyā* is limited, but not unreal, for the world is part of, and dependent upon, *Brahman*. Hence the Reality of *Brahman* extends through all things, "from top to bottom, from pure being to matter".[155] It is self-limited to become qualified reality. Again we see mention of different degrees of reality, 'from top to bottom'; from *Brahman* to the world.

It has been claimed that Aurobindo and Śamkara differ significantly this respect. Reyna, for example, states: "The descent of the Absolute into the finite, which would be categorically denied in the Śamkaran interpretation, is essential to Aurobindo's view as being the positive expression of the essential power of *Brahman*… Śamkara negates the life impulse as an ascetic, and negates the reality of the world as *māyāvādi*".[156] However we have already shown that Śamkara does not deny the reality of the world, despite claims to the contrary. If there is material reality, then it must be a manifestation of *Brahman*, unless *Brahman* is held to be something less the ultimate Reality, in which case It would lose all credibility as the One. Therefore Reyna's view is based on an incorrect interpretation of the Śamkaran metaphysic. Aurobindo agrees with our assertion, covered in more detail in the next section, that world-denying *māyāvada* is an

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[155] Organ (1962), p. 141.
[156] Reyna (1962), p. 27.

unsatisfactory answer to the Advaitin world problem. He asserts that an unreal depiction of the world is an "escape, not a solution", which "cuts the knot of the world problem, it does not disentangle it".[157] He claims to have developed Śamkara's *māyāvada* to its logical conclusion, but does not dismiss the work of his predecessor. Rather, he argues that the traditional *māyāvada* does not deny the reality of the world, and thus is consistent with his own views. Aurobindo and Śamkara both ascribe reality, but not ultimate Reality, to the material world.

It is clear that Aurobindo agrees with Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda on the function of *māyā*^{III}. Moreover, while the dependency of the world upon *Brahman* restricts the world to a contextual reality, it also affirms its reality, for if it were unreal there would be no positive manifestation. To be consistent with the Advaitic assertion that *Brahman* is one without another, the Advaitin must accept the world as part of *Brahman*, and not something fundamentally different (like the difference between real and unreal). Instead of viewing the dependence of the world on *Brahman* as a negative, limiting factor, the Neo-Vedāntins use it to confirm the reality of both entities.

4.4 Concealment of *Brahman* (*māyā*^{IV})

Māyā^{IV} explains how *Brahman* is concealed by *māyā* to appear as the world. To explain this feature Vivekananda uses a story from the *Bhagavad-gītā*, where Narada, a disciple of Krishna, asks his teacher to show him *māyā*. Krishna sends him to find water, so he goes to a village but in the process falls in love with a girl and forgets about Krishna. He marries the girl and lives with her in the village for

[157] Aurobindo (1951), p. 419.

twelve years. One day there is a flood and he is swept down a river, where he arrives once again at the feet of Krishna. Krishna asks him where he has been, as he has been waiting for half an hour. Twelve years had passed in Narada's mind, and yet in reality it was only half an hour.[158] This serves as Krishna's lesson of *māyā*; the two time periods, though different, are in essence the same as both represent the passing of time. In the analogy, the long period of time is the world within *māyā*, the short period is *Brahman*.[159] The world is essentially the same as *Brahman*, but appears to us as something else. *Māyā*[IV], then, explains how *Brahman* is concealed to appear as the world:

> Because we talk in vain, and because we are satisfied with the things of the senses, and because we are running after desires; therefore, we, as it were, cover the Reality with a mist… Our ignorance is a kind of mist that has come between us and the Truth.[160]

This statement focuses on *avidyā* as the source of *māyā*, the ignorance which conceals *Brahman*. As stated above, we are bound by our subjectivity and so cannot experience the infinite as it truly is. Note, however, that the presence of a mist does not mean that the thing beyond the mist is not real. Mist does not affect the objective status of a thing; it only affects our experience of it. The fact that we cannot see the true nature of *Brahman* does not imply that what we *can* see is unreal. Rather, it is simply our subjective interpretation of Reality. Elsewhere Vivekananda asserts:

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[158] Vivekananda (1999), II, pp. 120-1.
[159] Note that this view is consistent with Einstein's theory of general relativity, which asserts, amongst other things, that time and motion are relative to the position and speed of the subjective observer.
[160] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 88.

> *Brahman* is one, but is at the same time appearing to us as many, on the relative plane. Name and form are at the root of this relativity. For instance, what do you find when you abstract name and form from a jar? Only earth, which is its essence… The phenomenal world depends on this nescience which obstructs [true] knowledge… As soon as this nescience is removed, the realisation of *Brahman* which eternally exists is the result.[161]

Name and form create the appearance of separate entities, when in fact they are one; like the wave to the ocean or the jar to the earth. The essence of the jar is earth, since without earth there can be no jar, but without the jar there is still earth. Moreover, Vivekananda states that we can understand the concept of 'earth' by studying the earth jar. More generally, by studying the universe one can comprehend *Brahman*: "Knowing one lump of clay we know the nature of all the clay that is in the universe. Take up a little plant and study its life, and we know the universe as it is".[162] This is important for our thesis, since for this to be the case the world must be real. Something real cannot be understood through knowledge of the illusory or unreal. So to summarise, the subjective intellect causes us to apply name and form to things that we experience in the world. This is *avidyā*, and causes the concealment of *Brahman*. True knowledge occurs when (and only when) we sublate incomplete knowledge of forms. Then we may see the underlying essence of all things which is *Brahman*.

[161] Vivekananda (1999), VII, p. 163.
[162] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 205.

According to Radhakrishnan, *māyā*[IV] explains how the manifested phenomenal world blocks or conceals possible knowledge of *Brahman*: "The principle assumed to account for the appearance of *Brahman* as the world is also called *māyā*".[163] Existence in the phenomenal world is subjective, and subjective experience or knowledge cannot bring about objective knowledge of Reality:

> As the manifested world hides the real from the vision of mortals, it is said to be delusive in character. The world is not an illusion, though by regarding it as a mere mechanical determination of nature unrelated to [*Brahman*], we fail to perceive its Divine essence. It then becomes a source of delusion. The Divine *māyā* becomes *avidyāmāyā*. It is so, however, only for us mortals, shut off from the truth; to [*Brahman*] who knows all and controls it, it is *vidyāmāyā*. [*Brahman*] seems to be enveloped in the immense cloak of *māyā*.[164]

This passage makes three main assertions. Firstly, the phenomenal world is held to be delusory rather than illusory. The concealment of Reality is due to the delusory nature of *māyā*. *Māyā* makes it appear as though the *Ātman* is identical to the *ātman*, contrary to the *Ātman-Brahman* thesis. When we transcend *māyā* we realise that appearance in the phenomenal world, while it is real in a sense, is not ultimately Real. This delusion is also deceptive in that it creates desires based on incorrect beliefs, which are harmful to our prospects of realisation:

> When we are under the influence of *māyā*, we think we are completely separate entities, sharing little and mistaking individuality, which is one of the conditions of our life in space-time, for isolation and not wishing to lose the hard outlines of

[163] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 574.
[164] Radhakrishnan (1948), p. 43.

> our separate existence. *Māyā* keeps us busy with the world of succession and finitude.[165]

The phenomenal world is not ultimately Real and should not be considered as such. Difference does not entail illusion, but the 'hard outlines' of our existence are not an objective feature of Reality. *Māyā* creates the belief that Reality is characterised by separation and change, when in fact It is unitary and non-temporal. When we realise the implicit essence of the finite as the Infinite, we have attained true knowledge.

Secondly, *māyā*[IV] is the ontological equivalent of the subjective *avidyā* (as expressed by the term *avidyāmāyā*, which is born of the individual's inability to understand *māyā*). When knowledge (*vidyā*) is acquired, *māyā* disappears. Thus *māyā* in this case is a product of the subjective intellect. To be deluded, of course, is to hold a mistaken impression of a thing, and thus is a product of the mind. Illusion, on the other hand, is something *apart* from the mind, where something appears to be that which it is not. We can see, therefore, how *māyā*[IV] cannot be epistemologically compared to illusion, since the former is a product of the subjective mind, and not some external force acting upon it.

Thirdly, the world itself creates the necessary and sufficient conditions for delusion: "The world is not a deception but the occasion for it".[166] This contention, however, raises a conceptual difficulty for Radhakrishnan, for it is

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[165] Radhakrishnan (1959), *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, p. 94.
[166] Radhakrishnan (1948), p. 41.

hard to see how he can admit projection (of delusory content) on the on hand, and deny illusion on the other. Let us examine this point in more detail.

Māyā^{IV} appears to be the initial function of the traditional *māyā* as illustrated by the rope-snake analogy, where the rope is initially mistaken to be a snake, due to the observer's subjective ignorance. While the traditional analogy attributes two functions to *māyā* – concealment and projection – *māyā*^{IV}, by its very nature, must only conceal. Projection of that which is not Real presumably entails illusion. To admit projection, then, would necessitate the admission of illusion as well, an admission which Radhakrishnan is clearly not willing to make. But in his writings he lists the functions of *māyā* as both concealment and projection: "*Māyā* has the two functions of concealment of the real and the projection of the unreal".[167] This statement suffers from ambiguity, which we shall now attempt to resolve.

To clarify his point, we should rewrite Radhakrishnan's statement with the terminology developed in this paper. It would then read as follows: '*māyā* has the two functions of concealment of the *ultimately Real* and projection of the *relatively real*'. The material world is not unreal, although here unreal is taken to mean that which is not ultimately Real. That the world lacks the quality of ultimate Reality does not imply that it does not possess any reality at all. The projection of *māyā*, then, is not of unreality, but rather of manifested Reality; which we call reality. Projection in this case does not entail illusion, and contradiction due to terminological differences is thus avoided.

[167] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 571.

To summarise, Radhakrishnan's *māyā*^{IV} performs two functions: the concealment of Reality and the projection of some other sub-reality. The latter function is held to be the source of delusion, for it makes us believe that form and matter are Real. Form and matter are *part* of the Real, and hence real, but are not Real, since Reality does not have spatial or temporal parts. *Māyā*^{IV} is "the beginningless cosmic principle which hides Reality from the vision of man".[168] Moreover, as it hides it also deludes, since what is not hidden (the world) is held to be Reality, when in fact it is but a part of the Whole. In short, *māyā*^{IV} is the product of *avidyā*; the fallacy of mistaking the many for the One.

We have previously mentioned Aurobindo's separation of *māyā* into two parts; higher and lower. The function of *māyā*^{IV} can be explained by the lower *māyā*, which causes us to mistake material reality for ultimate Reality, and *ātman* for *Ātman*:

> [The lower *māyā*] persuades each that he is in all but not all in him and that he is in all as a separate being, not as a being always inseparably one with the rest of existence.[169]

In other words, the essential nature of *Brahman-Ātman* is concealed when the individual self mistakes itself for an exclusive, self-contained entity, an equivocation caused by *māyā*. Consequently, *Brahman* is concealed by *māyā*. It is concealed because our world-knowledge is subjective and finite, and *Brahman*

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[168] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 460.
[169] Aurobindo (1951), p. 137.

is neither of these things. We may understand the *concept* of *Brahman*, but not Its true nature. And while Aurobindo urges us to not reject the material world in favour of the spiritual, he admits that the individual body is the source of the mistake: “It seems indeed that the body is from the beginning the soul’s great difficulty, its continual stumbling-block and rock of offence”.[170] Note again that the problem here is not one of mistaking the unreal for the real, but rather of the real for the Real. The true source of ignorance is *māyā*, which makes us believe that the body is our essential nature.

Moreover, *Brahman* is concealed by Its own accord. It is the first stage of a two-stage process: concealment and revelation. The first is called involution, the second evolution. The material world with all its things and beings is the play (*līlā*) of self-concealment and self-revelation of *Brahman*.[171] *Brahman* conceals Itself, as a veil conceals a face, so that Its true nature disappears completely from the subjective experience.[172] Note that although *Brahman* is concealed, and there may be little or no knowledge of It in the material life, it does not follow that such life is unreal. Ignorance does not entail non-existence. *Māyā* hides *Brahman*, but does not create an unreal world in Its place. *Māyā*[IV] forms an integral part of our thesis of the Advaitic reality of the world – it explains how *Brahman* and the world are non-different, even though we live in the latter with no knowledge or experience of the former.

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[170] Aurobindo (1951), pp. 213-4.
[171] *Līlā* means play, amusement, or diversion. In this case the *līlā* is that of *Brahman*, who is said to create the material universe out of Its own sheer delight. To avoid confusion, *līlā* is usually attributed to the second state of *Brahman* (*Īśvara*), who is given attributes like that of a personal god. *Īśvara* may possess will and as such be capable of divine play (*līlā*), but the ultimate Reality (*Brahman*) cannot be reduced to a property-property possessor distinction, since at the *Brahman* level there is no distinction at all.
[172] Srivastava (1973), p. 82.

In this section we have explained in detail what we have identified as the four features of the world-affirming Neo-Vedāntic *māyāvada*. In doing so, we have shown that every facet of this doctrine affirms the reality of the material world, and thus serves as a direct argument against those who hold the world to be unreal. The four features – self-limitation of *Brahman*; inexplicable mystery; one-sided dependence; and concealment of *Brahman* – form a necessary and sufficient description of *māyā*. Let us now defend this theory against some important historical and contemporary objections.

5 Defence of World-Affirming *Māyāvada*

Māyāvada as formulated in this paper may be summarised thus: the whole (*Brahman*) is unchanging and unique, and holds these properties exclusively; *Brahman* precedes and is the material cause of the world; and the parts of the world are dependent upon *Brahman* for their existence, but not *vice versa*. The aim of this section is to show that world-affirming *māyāvada* is a plausible metaphysical position. In this paper we have attempted to convince the reader that *māyāvada* does not deny the reality of the material world. The alternative definition, world-denying *māyāvada*, is not only flawed, but also inconsistent with the seminal works of the most important Advaitin metaphysicians. This section examines some arguments made by proponents of world-denying *māyāvada* against world-affirming *māyāvada*, and show why they do not hold. Then some contemporary pluralist arguments against world-affirming *māyāvada* are considered and ultimately rejected in favour of some arguments that support the plausibility of our position.

First, however, some re-clarification of terms is required. The easiest way to distinguish between the world-affirming and world-denying versions of *māyāvada* is mereologically, in terms of the relationship between the whole and its parts. The whole in our case is *Brahman*. The parts are what we see and feel everyday; things in the material world. Note that spatiotemporal relations are considered as parts, not the whole itself, for *Brahman* is the material cause of all the parts of the universe, including space-time. The debate centres on the ontological status of the parts, namely whether or not they exist. World-affirming *māyāvada* holds that the parts are real; world-denying *māyāvada* claims that they are unreal. In other

words, the former is the thesis that there exists just one *basic* object; there may be other objects, but these only exist derivatively.[173] The latter is the thesis that there exists just one concrete object (the universe) which has no individual parts.[174]

World-denying *māyāvada* has been almost completely rejected by Western metaphysicians, for good reason. It holds that there is only one thing, and thus all distinction is false. It is a denial of things in the world; not, perhaps, the very existence of those things, but certainly how we see them and their various states of independence. Let us now look at two historical attempts to establish the truth of world-denying *māyāvada*, proposed by the post-Śamkaran dialecticians Śrīharsa and Madhusūdana.

5.1 Some Historical Arguments against World-Affirming *Māyāvada*

Śrīharsa holds that the world is indefinable and therefore unreal. He argues that conceptual categories such as cause, negation, and so on – ways in which things in the world are conceived – are always circular or inconsistent, and thus indefinable. If the categories are indefinable, he asserts, the world is also indefinable, and is hence inexplicable as real (so must be unreal).[175] Is it true, however, that every attempt to define the above-mentioned conceptual categories is doomed to failure? Not at all, but let us assume now, for argument's sake, that it is. We must still object to Śrīharsa's thesis, for the fact that the categories of cause, negation, and so on cannot be defined does not mean that the properties of

[173] Schaffer, Jonathan (2007a), 'Monism', in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, at http://plato.stanford.edu, accessed July 2007.
[174] Horgan, Terry, and Matjaz Potrĉ (2000), 'Blobjectivism and Indirect Correspondence', in *Facta Philosophica*, 2, p. 249. Horgan and Potrĉ, along with Parmenides, Melissa, and possibly Spinoza, hold that there is just one substance and consequently that distinction is false.
[175] Dravid (1994), p. 135.

cause, negation, and so on do not exist. For example, we have shown above that it is very difficult to positively or negatively describe *Brahman*. But it does not follow from this fact that *Brahman* is unreal; in fact for the Advaitin quite the opposite is the case! Just because a concept or thing is indefinable does not mean that it does not exist. The world may be one of these indefinable things (if Śrīharsa is correct) but it does not follow that it is necessarily unreal.

Madhusūdana believes that the only way to establish the ultimate Reality of *Brahman* is to prove the unreality of that which is *not Brahman* (the material world):

> The reality of the non-dual can be proved only if the unreality of the dual already has been proved… Whatever is unsublatable by any piece of knowledge other than that of *Brahman*, is apprehensible as real and is also different from sentience (or *Brahman*), is subject to absolute or eternal denial because it is cognisable, insentient, and limited in nature.[176]

In other words, *Brahman* and the world cannot both be real since they are fundamentally different in that the former is characterised by non-duality, whereas the latter is characterised by duality. Moreover, once the knowledge of *Brahman* arises, the experiential world is totally dissolved and replaced by the arisen true knowledge. Thus, holds Madhusūdana, the world must be unreal, for it is sublated by the knowledge of that which is truly real. The core claim here is basically that the material world which is not *Brahman* is completely illusory and rejectable by virtue of the fact that it is not the infinite *Brahman*. But, as Dravid

[176] Madhusūdana, *Advaita-siddhi*, in Dravid (1994), p. 133.

notes, this assertion is a tautology: “the empirical which is other than the Absolute is unreal, because it is other than the Absolute”.[177] Furthermore, how can we possibly know that the world is a mere chimera that will be sublated by knowledge of *Brahman*? Well, one option is to deny the world on the basis of scriptural evidence (although we have shown above that the evidence, at least in the *Upanishads*, supports the reality of the world), but then the question becomes a religious one based on faith, and not a philosophical one based on reason. Hence there shall remain nothing to prove. Otherwise it seems that there is no good empirical reason to believe that the world is unreal. Another problem with Madhusūdana’s thesis is that it alleges that all which is ‘cognisable, insentient, and limited in nature’ is subject to ‘eternal denial’. How can a thing with these properties be subject to complete denial? Surely if it is *something* at all, as it must be if it has these properties, then it cannot be rejected entirely. A non-existent thing cannot be a property possessor. This allegation therefore rests upon the idea that all which does not have the properties of *Brahman* is unreal by virtue of not having the properties of *Brahman*. Hence we return, of course, to the tautology, as Dravid has noted above. Moreover, if it is impossible to positively describe *Brahman*, then how may we know which properties a thing must lack in order to be deemed unreal? If *Brahman* cannot be described, then we cannot deny another thing by virtue of the absence of certain properties that we cannot describe! Madhusūdana has thus failed in his attempt to prove the unreality of matter.

Brooks has identified another problem with the illusory world thesis, albeit briefly, which I shall now expand upon. He states that world-denying *māyāvada*

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[177] Dravid (1994), p. 134.

causes a paradox to arise, similar to the ‘liar paradox’ (‘this sentence is false’), and other paradoxes of self-reference: “For if the world is an illusion, then the philosophy of Advaita with its doctrine of *māyā*, since it is part of the world, is part of the illusion; the doctrine that the world is an illusion is itself an illusion!”[178] This objection has been also raised by the Viśistādvaitins. Advaitins who wish to maintain the illusory status of the world usually respond by stating that this paradox further supports their claim that the world is fundamentally inconsistent and thus illusory. But this response begs the question by claiming that any argument against the illusory status of the world must be wrong, by virtue of the fact that the world is illusory! It seems that attempts to posit an illusory material world are paradoxical and suffer from inconsistency, and thus should be rejected in favour of a non-illusory, world-affirming *māyāvada*.

5.2 Defence of World-Affirming *Māyāvada* from Pluralist Objections

We have established that world-affirming *māyāvada* is preferable to world-denying *māyāvada* both in terms of consistency with the Advaitin metaphysic and basic plausibility. We now turn to the debate between pluralism and the position that we have defined as world-affirming *māyāvada*. Again, we shall use mereological language to distinguish between these two positions. Both maintain the reality of the whole and the part, a claim that seems entirely obvious, were it not for the above-mentioned sceptics. The mereological difference between pluralism and world-affirming *māyāvada*, then, centres on the order of *causal priority* (where cause is taken to mean material cause in the Aristotelian sense,

[178] Brooks (1973), p. 105.

rather than the formal, efficient, and final varieties. Causation in this sense is non-temporal, and is based on a ground-consequence distinction). Specifically, the debate addresses the question: which is prior, the whole or the part? Consider a circle. Is the circle prior to its halves, or are the halves prior to the circle? It is a question of what is *basic*; whether the whole is the base of the parts, or the parts the base of the whole. Intuitively the latter might appear more likely. Individual people come before a group of people; individual stones come before a pile of stones. But consider an arbitrarily-divided cake. In this instance, it seems that the cake must come before the slices. So intuition is not as valuable as it appears in this case (although the pluralist does hold commonsense to be in her favour, a claim that we shall address shortly). In short, the question is whether the order of dependence, or material causation, is bottom-up or top-down.

Many attempted refutations of non-dualism are based on a rejection of theses akin to world-denying *māyāvada*. While world-denying *māyāvada* is a very difficult thesis to defend, we hold that world-affirming *māyāvada* is a plausible ontological position. Recall that the fundamental reason for asserting the reality of the Advaitic material world is that it is a self-manifestation of *Brahman*. Its reality is confirmed by its dependence on *Brahman*. In other words, the parts are dependent on the whole; the whole is prior to the parts. For our positive thesis of world-affirming *māyāvada* to be credible we must defend it against the best contemporary metaphysical objections. If we succeed in this task we can show that it is a plausible, if not preferable, ontological position. In this part of the section we shall examine what we believe to be the four strongest arguments against world-affirming *māyāvada*, covering several areas: commonsense;

combinatorial possibility; haecceitistic possibility; and heterogeneity. Then we shall look at the two best arguments for world-affirming *māyāvada*, based on limitless decomposition and the entangled universe (emergence). Our expected result in this section will be to conclude that world-affirming *māyāvada* is a plausible philosophical concept.

5.2.1 Arguments against World-Affirming *Māyāvada*

The pluralist argument from commonsense has the same structure as other arguments of this type. It holds that commonsense tells us that part is prior to whole, and that if this is indeed the case, there is reason to believe that part is prior to whole. Russell, for example, states: "I share the commonsense belief that there are many separate things; I do not regard the world as consisting merely in phases and unreal divisions of a single indivisible reality".[179] The proponent of this argument holds that it has serious implications for the non-dualist or monist: "Monism has an additional very serious disadvantage: it is inconsistent with something that appears to be an evident datum of experience, namely, that there is a plurality of things".[180] We must first note that it does not seem to us that commonsense should have much authority here. Intuition about this topic is just as likely to be wrong as it is to be right, judging by the complexity of the issue. It is difficult to see how metaphysics and quantum mechanics could fall into the realm of commonsense. That aside, we still do not believe that commonsense necessarily favours the pluralist. World-affirming *māyāvada* is not inconsistent with the fact that there is a plurality of things, although world-denying *māyāvada* certainly is. We agree that commonsense points towards a plurality of things. It

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[179] Russell, Bertrand (1985), 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism', in David Pears (ed.), *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, p. 36.
[180] Hoffman, Joshua and Gary S. Rosenkrantz (1997), *Substance: Its Nature and Existence*, p. 78.

is for this reason that we have posited the world-affirming *māyāvada*. We hold simply that the whole (*Brahman*) is prior to its parts (the universe). World-affirming *māyāvada* does not deny the existence of these things. It just disputes the order of dependence. We agree, then, that the parts of the world are real.

The pluralist might still claim that commonsense is in her favour with regards to priority, in that it tells us that the parts are basic. But as we mentioned above, it is not clear which way commonsense might fall. Individual stones are prior to a pile of stones, but a cake is prior to its slices. Similarly, a human body is prior to its organs. It appears that commonsense favours pluralism in the case of 'mere collections', and world-affirming *māyāvada* in the case of 'real unities'.[181] So if we talk about integrated wholes (such as a cake), commonsense favours world-affirming *māyāvada*. In fact, very basic knowledge of quantum mechanics tells us that boundaries are quite arbitrary. Atoms 'mix'; boundaries between objects are somewhat blurry at the atomic level. We might even go so far to attest that the pragmatists are correct and Aristotle incorrect, and there are no essential properties of things so that all divisions and characterisations are necessarily arbitrary. But this progresses far past the realm of commonsense. We might state that real unities are more fundamental entities than mere collections, in which case world-affirming *māyāvada* is preferable since it describes more satisfactorily the former, which is the more important relation, but this would probably be question-begging. All things considered, we are content to leave the commonsense debate by stating that commonsense does not favour the pluralist.

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[181] Schaffer (forthcoming-a), 'Monism: The Priority of the Whole', at http://people.umass.edu/schaffer/Papers.htm, p. 18, accessed July 2007. Schaffer holds a position that we believe is very similar to world-affirming *māyāvada*, which he calls 'priority monism'.

In any case, this conclusion is measured, as we have stated, by the fact that commonsense does not hold much weight here.

Sider, a pluralist, claims that what we have defined as world-affirming *māyāvada* cannot account for combinatorial possibility. He asks that we imagine a world which consists entirely of a single computer screen. The screen has 16 pixels; four down and four across. Each pixel has two possible states; on and off. Hence there are 2^{16} possible states for the entire screen. World-affirming *māyāvada* and pluralism agree that the screen exists, but Sider claims that only the pluralist can explain just *why* the screen has 2^{16} members.[182] In other words, the number of possible states of the whole can only be explained by the number of parts and the possible states of those parts. It is a question of causal direction: do the features of the parts explain the features of the whole, or *vice versa*? The pluralist, of course, holds that the former is true.

But is the pluralist approach (the possible states of the whole are based on the possible states of the parts) any better than that of world-affirming *māyāvada* (the possible states of the parts are based on the possible states of the whole)? Not necessarily. Both use primitives of the supposed cause to explain the supposed effect. When considered objectively, it is no less logical to use the possible states of the whole as a primitive than it is to use the possible states of the parts. Top-down and bottom-up explanations both adequately describe the mereological relationship in this case. While we cannot prove that the approach of world-affirming *māyāvada* does a better job of explaining the causal order, we have

[182] Sider, Theodore (2007), 'Against Monism', in *Analysis* 67, p. 3. Sider argues against monism, specifically existence monism (world-denying *māyāvada*) and priority monism (world-affirming *māyāvada*).

shown that neither can the pluralist. Certainly world-denying *māyāvada* cannot, and perhaps this is Sider's mistake, to attack the weaker part-negating ontology under the heading of monism, betrayed by his statement that "according to monism, there exists only one object".[183] This is an account of world-denying *māyāvada*. Although he later attests that his arguments apply also to what amounts to world-affirming *māyāvada*,[184] they certainly work better against world-denying *māyāvada*. Again, to reject world-denying *māyāvada* is not to reject world-affirming *māyāvada*; they do not stand and fall together. Combinatorial possibility thus fails to prove the pluralist bottom-up supervenience. Rather, it shows that supervenience goes both ways in this case, so that neither approach can be favoured.

Sider proposes another argument in favour of pluralism, based on haecceitistic possibility. He asks that we imagine a world of two pixels where nothing else exists. Each pixel has two possible states; on and off. If the haecceitist is correct, then a world where pixel A is on and pixel B is off is a different world from the world in which pixel A is off and pixel B is on. So the statespace would have four members: both pixels on; both off; A on and B off; A off and B on. Sider holds that world-affirming *māyāvada* cannot admit that the system has four members, but rather can only admit three: both on; both off; one on and one off.[185] Note that this objection is similar to Kant's 'lone hand' argument for the existence of absolute space, where the 'handedness' of the hand in question can only be determined by the absolute space around it. If there are no reference points, then we cannot determine whether the hand is left or right in nature. But

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[183] Sider (2007), p. 1.
[184] Sider (2007), p. 2.
[185] Sider (2007), pp. 4-5.

handedness is not an intrinsic property of the hand, so Kant's argument fails to establish the truth of absolute space.[186] Sider has attempted to make the same argument, to show that world-affirming *māyāvada* cannot assert which pixel is on and which is off, since it cannot admit reference points that exist due to separate entities. But again he makes the mistake of treating world-affirming *māyāvada* like world-denying *māyāvada*. World-denying *māyāvada* cannot admit the four states, because it cannot distinguish between the two pixels. But why cannot world-affirming *māyāvada* distinguish between pixel A and pixel B? After all, world-affirming *māyāvada* does not deny the existence of the pixels; it merely claims that the whole is ontologically prior. Each pixel is real, and is different from the other, and is distinguished by this difference. This objection applies only to world-denying *māyāvada*, and not to world-affirming *māyāvada*.

The final argument in favour of pluralism that we shall consider maintains that every basic entity must be homogenous. Thus if the whole is to be the base of the parts, it must be homogenous. But the whole world is *not* homogenous, and thus cannot be a basic entity.[187] In other words, the claim is that pluralism can posit a heterogeneous world, because the parts differ from one another, even though they are homogeneous in that they are identical with themselves. World-affirming *māyāvada*, on the other hand, cannot posit a heterogeneous world, since the whole does not differ from another thing, as it is the *only* thing. As it happens, we agree that the world is experientially heterogeneous; this seems like a sensible claim, opposed only by world-denying *māyāvada* and nihilism. There are many

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[186] Le Poidevin, Robin (2003), *Travels in Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time*, pp. 62-6.
[187] Schaffer (2007a), p. 16.

different things in the world. But despite this admission, top-down priority remains a plausible concept.

Schaffer attempts to reject this argument by denying the premise which states that any basic entity must be homogenous.[188] But we need not follow Schaffer here, since in our case the nature of the whole is already determined as homogenous. *Brahman* is homogenous by definition (there is no difference at the *Brahman*-level). Thus if we wish to discuss a heterogeneous whole we must refer to something other than *Brahman*, or remove ourselves from the Advaitin metaphysical debate altogether. Our answer to this objection, then, is to be found in the preceding sections of this paper. World-affirming *māyāvada* explains that *Brahman* is causally prior to the material world, and how this should be so. *Brahman* is independently Real while the world is dependently real. Hence *Brahman* is homogeneous, and the world heterogeneous, without contradiction, which is accounted for by the two different levels of reality. *Brahman* is the essence of the world without being compromised by the distinction which characterises it: "If a thing cannot subsist apart from something else, the latter is the essence of that thing. The cause is logically prior to the effect".[189] According to our positive thesis, then, the base entity can be homogeneous, and the dependent entity heterogeneous, without contradiction. Just because the parts differ from one another, does not mean that the whole is not identical to itself. World-affirming *māyāvada* adequately explains this alleged contradiction, and the heterogeneity argument thus fails in our case. Now we shall propose two arguments in favour of the plausibility of world-affirming *māyāvada*.

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[188] Schaffer (forthcoming-a), p. 25.

[189] Radhakrishnan (1953), *The Principal Upanishads: With Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes*, p. 80.

5.2.2 Arguments for World-Affirming *Māyāvada*

We claim that pluralism cannot adequately account for the possibility of limitless decomposition.[190] A world of limitless decomposition is one where every part has its own proper parts; so that there are no ultimate parts to form a pluralistic base (an ultimate part is one which has no parts itself). Limitless decomposition might occur if every part is extendible (which is certainly plausible) and hence can always be divided into two halves. This process can occur indefinitely, and so there can be no base for the pluralist, because there are no basic entities; the division does not stop. World-affirming *māyāvada* can account for limitless decomposition by stating that the whole is basic, and thus avoids the problem. Pluralism, however, cannot, since it is unable to identify the ultimate part which might form the base. Hence only world-affirming *māyāvada* can explain a world of limitless decomposition.

This argument rests on the claim that either the parts or the whole must be basic. It cannot be true that neither is the case, nor can it be true that both are the case. This is an acceptable assumption, for experience tells us that all things must have a base (apart, obviously, from the ultimate base), just as all effects must have a cause. We claim, then, that if limitless decomposition is possible, then the base of the world must be the whole (*Brahman*). Conversely, if it is the case that pluralism is true, then limitless decomposition is not possible. We cannot prove here the truth or otherwise of limitless decomposition. But it is certainly true that we have no knowledge or proof of the existence of non-extended particles, in which case limitless decomposition is a very real possibility.

[190] This argument is proposed in Schaffer (2007a), pp. 17-8, and Schaffer (forthcoming-a), pp. 26-9.

The pluralist might argue that nothing is basic in worlds of limitless decomposition.[191] But this seems counterintuitive, and runs against the widely-accepted idea that being needs an ultimate ground. Another option would be to deny world-affirming *māyāvada* by advocating some sort of intermediate baseness. But this approach also denies pluralism. Moreover, it appears that *all* things, apart from the absolute poles of the spectrum, must be counted as intermediate. There is no objective truth regarding just which section of intermediatary parts could be basic. Therefore virtually all things would be the base of themselves and each other, and the only thing which would not be basic would be the whole (since on the other end there are no non-extended particles). This is not a viable solution. The pluralist's only other option is to deny the possibility of worlds of limitless decomposition. Hence the burden of proof is on the pluralist to show that limitless decomposition is not possible. Until that time its possibility makes world-affirming *māyāvada* the preferable ontological explanation, or at least a highly plausible one.

While the limitless decomposition argument shows that world-affirming *māyāvada* should be taken seriously, it is based on possibility, not fact. The best argument for the plausibility of world-affirming *māyāvada* is based on emergence due to the entangled state of the universe, and like all good arguments it is based on empirical evidence. All good metaphysical theories should be based on good physical evidence, as Healey asserts: "Metaphysics follows physics in fact as well

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[191] Schaffer (2007a), p. 18.

as Aristotle".[192] Let us now examine the argument, which we have formulated thus:

1) At the quantum level, the whole universe is entangled.
2) If the whole universe is entangled, then the whole possesses emergent properties.
3) If the whole possesses emergent properties, then the whole does not supervene on its parts, in that the whole displays properties greater than the sum of its parts.
4) If the whole does not supervene on its parts, then whole must be logically prior to part.
5) Therefore, whole is prior to part.

In other words, since entanglement is a truth about quantum wholes, and that this truth can be applied to the entire universe, it follows that the universe displays qualities of emergence. Hence the whole displays properties greater than the sum of its parts. If the whole displays properties greater than the sum of its parts, then whole is prior to part, and thus world-affirming *māyāvada* must be a plausible ontological position.

This argument is deductively valid, so we must now establish the truth of the four premises. We shall now do just that, by defending each premise in order. Our defence of premise (1) begins by explaining quantum entanglement. An entangled quantum system is one where the states of more than one particle can

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[192] Healey, Richard A. (1991), 'Holism and Nonseparability', in *The Journal of Philosophy* 88, p. 393.

only be described with reference to each other, even though they are independent and spatially separated. Such a system has been made famous by the Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen (EPR) thought experiment.[193] Imagine that two spin-½ particles, A and B, are produced in a state with zero total spin. When A is in a spin-up state, B is in a spin-down state, and *vice versa*. No matter how far apart they are, a spin measurement of one will always set the spin state of the other to the opposite (since the total spin-state is zero). It is as though they are physically connected, but they are not. There is an extra quality that A and B possess as a whole that they do not possess as a combination of individuals, which causes the observation of one to determine the state of the other.

The universe is one very large entangled system. To confirm this we can simply take any two particles anywhere in the universe, and we may see that they are entangled, regardless of spatial distance, as shown by the EPR experiment. Moreover, take a third particle, and that particle will be entangled with one or both of the original two: A entangled with B, B with C, A with C, and so on. Even temporally it seems that the universe is entangled. As far as we know, everything is a shard of the primordial atom. The universe has evolved according to the original impetus delivered by the big bang, at which time all particles interacted with each other. The universe, then, is entangled.

Premise (2) can be confirmed by equating entanglement with emergence. Emergence occurs when mereological supervenience fails. Ordinarily a whole is said to supervene on its parts, in that the properties of the whole are determined

[193] Einstein, A., B. Podolsky, and N. Rosen (1935), 'Can Quantum-Mechanical Description of Physical Reality Be Considered Complete?' in *Physical Review* 47, pp. 777-80.

by the properties of its parts, and cannot be greater than the sum of those parts. Supervenience fails when the whole possesses properties not possessed by the sum of its parts. So P is an emergent property of X iff: (a) X instantiates P; (b) P is an intrinsic property; and (c) X's instantiating P doesn't supervene on the intrinsic properties of, and spatiotemporal relations among, X's proper parts.[194] In other words, (a) means that if P exists, then the essence that 'has' P must exist; and (b) means that X's having P doesn't rely on X's relationship with other things. With regards to (c), a set of properties A supervenes on a set of properties B iff any two objects which share all properties in B must also share all properties in A. That is, A-properties supervene on B-properties if having B-properties implies having A-properties. For example, if psychological properties supervene on physical properties, then two physically identical people will also be psychologically identical. Note that the relationship of supervenience is not symmetric; if they are psychologically identical, they can still be physically different.

As we stated above, there is an extra quality that A and B possess as a whole that they do not possess as individuals, as illustrated by entanglement. Hence supervenience fails, since it is possible for the whole to have properties greater than the sum of its parts. So entanglement entails emergence, and since the universe is one large entangled whole, it too is emergent. The whole universe possesses an extra property not possessed by the sum of its parts. Supervenience fails, and thus premise (3) is also true. Note that the Advaitin worldview is consistent with these findings. *Brahman* limits Itself to become the world; hence

[194] Schaffer (forthcoming-a), p. 21.

Brahman is greater than the world. Emergence as a theory allows for the base of the world to be greater than its parts. There are significant similarities in the metaphysics of the very old and the very new. As Harris remarks in a passage which reminds us of Aurobindo:

> The sciences present the world as a single system… Further…the series of forms and systems which evolve tend continuously towards complexes of greater cohesion and comprehensiveness, fuller completion and (in the original sense of the word) perfection.[195]

Let us continue with the argument. Premise (4) follows from the three that precede it. Top-down metaphysical priority seems to explain more adequately the fact that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts than its bottom-up counterpart, since the whole can be limited to become the parts. The onus is on the pluralist to show why this should not be the case. One way she might attempt to do this is by stating that entanglement represents a new fundamental relation between particles, as opposed to a property held exclusively by the whole. If this is the case, supervenience should be revised to include that fundamental relation, so that the whole will once again supervene on its parts. This approach is a good one, so long as the pluralist can identify and prove just what the new fundamental relation might be. At the moment she cannot. Hence what must come from the pluralist is a detailed analysis of the status of quantum particles, namely concerning the possible existence of a previously-unknown fundamental relation between them. Until that time, it must be conceded that (5) is a reasonable conclusion, based on premises (1), (2), (3), and (4). World-affirming *māyāvada*

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[195] Harris, Errol E. (1965), *The Foundations of Metaphysics in Science*, p. 452.

provides a plausible, if not preferable, explanation of the phenomenon or universal emergence due to universal entanglement.

We have shown that world-affirming *māyāvada* is better than pluralism at explaining limitless decomposition and emergence due to entanglement. World-affirming *māyāvada* is certainly a plausible, if not preferable, position in contemporary metaphysics. Several physicists, such as Bohm, have attempted to posit a holistic view of the universe. It seems that there is a certain wholeness displayed in the universe. The sensible way to explain this holism is from the top down; from the whole to the part. If the whole is basic, then the emergence of the universe is accounted for. If not, the pluralist must find some other fundamental relation between particles that explains this phenomenon.

6 Implications of World-Affirming *Māyāvada*

So far we have shown that *māyāvada* is not a doctrine of illusion or unreality. The phenomenal world is real. It is possible to explain how the limitless *Brahman* can be manifested as the material world without having to resort to a theory of illusion, despite Murti's claim to the contrary at the beginning of this paper. We have also shown that world-affirming *māyāvada* is a plausible position within contemporary metaphysics. This section discusses some implications of world-affirming *māyāvada*. It begins with the metaphysical implications, where it goes through each of the four features of *māyā* as well as a suggestion that the rope-snake analogy does not adequately explain world-affirming *māyāvada*. It ends with some social implications, based on Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo, whereby the reality of the world combined with the theory of Oneness is employed to create a base of ethical action for the good of all.

6.1 Metaphysical Implications

This part of the section is dedicated to the metaphysical implications of our positive thesis of world-affirming *māyāvada*. It considers each of the four features of our Neo-Vedāntic māyāvada, as well as an examination of the traditional rope-snake analogy.

The self-limitation of *Brahman* (*māyā*^{I}) is fundamental to our formulation of world-affirming *māyāvada*, for it explains *Brahman's* power of self-manifestation. It also provides a limiting power that is necessary to transform the infinite *Brahman* into the finite world. This limiting power, of course, comes from *Brahman* Itself, for since *Brahman* is one without another, there can be no

other source. For this reason *māyā* explains *Brahman's* power of self-manifestation. *Māyā*[I] helps to clarify the confusion between two terms; emanation and creation. Creation is actually a poor translation of the word *srsti*. Emanation, or 'letting loose', is a much better translation, although unfortunately creation is more common. Thus *Brahman* does not create the world. More accurately, *Brahman* is emanated in the world, and this emanation is self-caused. If we say that the world is created, then the concept of illusion may be justifiably raised to explain the relationship between the two entities, but if we talk of emanation then the same problem does not arise, for the world may be explained as simply emanating from *Brahman*, just as light emanates from a lamp, or heat from a flame. Light and heat are not illusory in these cases, and by the same reasoning neither is the world.

Inexplicable mystery (*māyā*[II]) is an epistemological issue that concerns knowledge of the relationship between *Brahman* and the world. The basic problem is that we live within *māyā*, and *māyā* hides from us the true nature of things. How, then, may we understand Reality from within *māyā*? Can *māyā* be understood from within *māyā*? Subjectively we each have a different viewpoint with which to see a particular event, so that even though the event has an objective reality, our observation is always under the influence of some bias. When manifested at the subjective level, Reality becomes many-sided and has different manifestations at different levels. We may utilise the sceptical Jain doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, which claims that reality is many-faceted, to explain this point. It explains conditional judgment, stating that reality is many-sided so

that no particular view can be false, allowing the following assertions to be made regarding some thing:

> It is; It is not; It is and is not; It is indescribable; It is and is indescribable; It is not and is indescribable; It is, is not and is indescribable.[196]

These seven views appear to contradict one another, but Jainism holds each to be true. This system adequately explains the Neo-Vedāntic claim that material reality is subjectively inexplicable. For example, the three statements ‘a woman is the mother’, ‘is not the mother’, ‘and is both’, are non-contradictory if one understands the particular viewpoint from which each is made. In relation to a particular boy she is the mother; in relation to another she is not the mother; and in relation to both boys she both is and is not the mother. Since both ideas (*is* and *is not*) cannot be conveyed at the same time, the woman may be called indescribable (without relation to a particular point of view); and yet she is still the mother, not the mother, and so on. *Anekāntavāda* is neither self-contradictory nor vague, but rather represents the adequate description of the nature of a thing from the different viewpoints that exist. There is an objective truth of the matter, of course, but this truth cannot be discovered through subjective inference. Objects in the material world, then, are many-sided due to the subjective nature of observation. A thing can be viewed in many different ways from within *māyā*, and an objective view of that thing cannot be achieved while one remains in *māyā*. Hence the material world, which exists due to the power of *māyā*, is said to be inexplicable, as is that very power.

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[196] Jain, Hiralal (1997), ‘Jainism: Its History, Principles, and Precepts’, in Swami Lokeswarananda (ed.), *Studies in Jainism*, p. 23.

Radhakrishnan states that reality and truth are of just two types; ultimate and penultimate: "Reality, according to the Vedānta, has two aspects, the higher and the lower, the fixed and the changing, the absolute and the relative".[197] When describing reality, he categorises *Brahman* as the ultimate ontological level, whereas he places the seven views listed above, as well as the material world more generally, into the penultimate level. Moreover, Radhakrishnan notes that knowledge of ultimate Reality can be achieved by realising the true nature of oneself, in this lifetime, for *Brahman* is identical with the *Ātman*: "In man there is a struggle between the higher and the lower… He is an amphibious animal living in two worlds".[198] One can experience ultimate Reality without rejecting the material world, because they are not incompatible. Hence we are not obliged to acknowledge *Brahman* at the expense of the material world, for the latter is the manifestation of the former, so the two cannot be considered separately.

One-sided dependence (*māyā*[III]) asserts that material things depend upon *Brahman* for their existence; they are a part of the greater whole. On some occasions the part cannot exist without the whole. Consider a wooden table. The property of 'wood' can exist without the property of 'table', but not *vice versa*, for without the wood there can be no wooden table. Without the table, however, the wood could still exist as something else. So too with *Brahman* and the world. The world is not an illusion, but rather is characterised by its inexplicability, and this inexplicability is not a negative thing like illusion but instead a positive process of mystery and discovery.

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[197] Radhakrishnan (1911), 'The Ethics of the *Bhagavadgītā* and Kant', in *International Journal of Ethics* 21, p. 466.
[198] Radhakrishnan (1920), *The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 431.

The main point to consider regarding *māyā*$^{\text{III}}$ is that there is a difference between transformation (*parināma*) and appearance (*vivarta*). When milk is turned into yoghurt a transformation takes place, where the effect is as real as the cause. In the relationship between *Brahman* and the world the cause is not altered by the appearance of the effect. *Brahman* is eternal and unchanging, and thus cannot be transformed. The world, then, is an appearance of *Brahman*, caused by *māyā*. Again, the effect depends upon the cause for its existence, and therefore is not ultimately Real like the cause. Only that which is not dependent on another thing can be considered ultimately Real.

Note that the categorisation of the world as an appearance does not mean that the world is unreal. *Māyā* causes us to see part of the whole and erroneously assume that the part is in fact the whole. Since the part is part of the whole, however, the experience of it is not unreal, but rather an experience of something less than the whole. If we can see the hand of a person, but not the rest of that person, it does not mean that the hand is an illusion. What it means is that we cannot see the whole person, which makes us believe that the hand is a separate object. When I can see the whole person, I realise that the hand is but a part of the person, and is thus dependent upon the existence of the person for its own existence. Without the person, there can be no hand (as part of the person). Worldly experience is the experience of the part, which is dependent on, and non-different from, the whole.

Concealment of *Brahman* (*māyā*$^{\text{IV}}$) is the concealment of ultimate Reality, which makes one believe that form and matter are ultimately Real when they are not. It

is the product of *avidyā*; the fallacy of considering the characteristics of the many to be the characteristics of the One. The delusive power of *māyā* evaporates, however, when we experience the whole. *Māyā* has no power over the liberated soul. The forms of the world may remain while the sense organs and subjective intellect operate, but they do not affect the acquired knowledge of *Brahman*.[199] Thus we can experience *Brahman* while we remain in this world, seemingly unaffected by *māyā*. This theory refutes the alleged unreality of the world, for if the world were unreal then the forms of the material world would vanish once *Brahman* is realised. But on the other hand if the world is a manifestation of the whole then it is entirely acceptable to posit that the world shall remain once one has realised *Brahman*, so long as we consider the nature of *māyā* objectively: "Whether the forms dissolve themselves in the formless or show themselves to be mere appearances of *Brahman*, on either view the world is not a mere illusion".[200]

There is one more metaphysical implication of world-affirming *māyāvada* to consider, regarding the well-known rope-snake analogy used to explain the effect of *māyā*. Briefly, the rope-snake analogy imagines a person who enters a dark room and sees a snake. She recoils in fear, but once she has turned on the lights she realises that the snake was in fact a piece of rope. The illusory snake represents the material world, while the rope represents the truth of *Brahman*. The light is the ultimate knowledge of *Brahman*, which allows one to see the truth. So the snake is illusory and unreal. *Māyā*, then, is held to conceal the real and project the unreal. The term 'unreal' has two potential significations here. It could mean not-real (non-existent); or logically impossible (such as a round

[199] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 639.
[200] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 639.

square). In this case, however, it must mean the former, since the world is experienced, and thus cannot be a logical impossibility. Hence the rope-snake analogy asserts the projection of an unreal (not-real) world. But as we have shown, *māyā* conceals ultimate Reality, but does not project unreality in its place. Rather, the material world is dependently real. The rope-snake analogy does not adequately explain the subtle totality of *māyāvada*. Aurobindo agrees: "The analogy is therefore unhelpful; it would be valid only if our image of the universe were a falsity reflecting a true universe which is not here but elsewhere".[201] But the universe is not a falsity. In the analogy, the snake is mere appearance, whereas in actuality the world is substantially real. While this metaphor contains the theory of the dependence of the world upon *Brahman*, it fails to explain the self-manifestation of *Brahman* as the world.

Traditionally the snake is not entirely unreal – it has phenomenal reality – but it is not considered part of the rope. It is an apparition of the mind. But we have shown that the Advaitin metaphysic considers the world as a part of *Brahman*, and we thus feel that another snake-based analogy, found in the *Vedānta Sūtra*, is a better analogy for *māyāvada*. In it, *Brahman* is compared to a snake and the material world to its coils, posture, and so on:

> *ubhaya-vyapadeśāt tu ahi-kundalavat.*
>
> But on account of two-fold designation, (the relation of the highest Self to the individual soul has to be viewed) like that of the snake to its coils.[202]

[201] Aurobindo (1951), p. 386.
[202] *Vedānta Sūtra*, III. 2. 27.

Here reference is made to the relationship between the universal *Ātman* and the individual *ātman*, which is the equivalent expression of the metaphysical relationship between *Brahman* and the world. Just as apart from the snake there can be no coils, apart from *Brahman* there can be no world. The snake is the coils, the hood, and the posture – all these things. The coils are not independently real, but they are like the snake; indeed, they *are* the snake. So too the world is real like *Brahman*. When viewed independently, the coils, hood and so on appear to be separate entities, yet when the snake is viewed as a whole, it is clear that the parts are just parts of the snake which is itself the whole. *Māyā*, then, functions to prevent one from seeing the entire snake, and making the mistake of believing the part to be the whole, as we have stated previously.

Moreover, in the analogy we must not assume that without the coils there can be no snake, at least in its physical state. Such a mistake would entail the supposition that the *idea* of a snake can exist, but the actual physical snake does not come into being without its parts. The relationship between *Brahman* and the world is not of this kind. *Māyāvada* is characterised by dependence, where the parts are dependent on the whole, but not *vice versa*. True knowledge – the ability to see the entire snake – does not cause the coils to disappear, but shows that the coils are part of a greater whole. Hence a contradictory state of affairs is not required for one to simultaneously experience the whole and its parts. This could not be the case if the world was unreal. The parts of the snake are not illusory, and neither is the world. *Māyāvada* should be considered as the whole (the snake) and its parts (the coils), not as reality (the rope) and unreality (the snake).

6.2 Ethical Implications

This part of the section considers some ethical and social implications of world-affirming *māyāvada*, focusing on Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo. Even if we were to be convinced of the truth of world-denying *māyāvada* (which we are not), its advocate must still answer the ethical objection. If the world is unreal, and it is true that "the ethics of the Vedānta is dependent on its metaphysics",[203] then why should we have any ethical values at all? To hold the world as unreal is to hold all things within the world as unreal, including morality. Thus if the world is unreal, ethical values are unreal. As Radhakrishnan states:

> If all that exists is *Brahman*, and if the world of plurality is a shadow, there cannot be any real distinction between good and evil. If the world is a shadow, sin is less than a shadow. Why should not a man play with sin and enjoy a crime, since they are only shadows?… If moral distinctions are valid, life is real; if life is unreal, then they are not valid.[204]

This is an objection that has been raised in criticism of the metaphysics of Śamkara (an unwarranted objection, since he does not hold the world to be unreal, as we have shown). For those who maintain world-denying *māyāvada*, however, this objection poses a serious problem. It seems that if one posits the world as unreal, then one must also admit that morality is unreal. It is clear that the metaphysics of Śrīharsa, Madhusūdana, Deussen, Shāstrī, *et al* do not allow for *any* ethical assertions, for all assertions in the world must be unreal. This position

[203] Radhakrishnan (1914b), 'The Ethics of the Vedānta', in *International Journal of Ethics* 24, p. 168.

[204] Radhakrishnan (1923), II, p. 621.

is undesirable and should be avoided. The most effective way to avoid this objection is to object to world-denying *māyāvada*.

Not only does world-denying *māyāvada* negate ethical possibilities; it also encourages asceticism as the only way to happiness and fulfilment, for all other worldly pleasures are held to be fleeting and unreal. But although for the Advaitin happiness in the world is not ultimately Real, it is real, and so a complete rejection of this reality may be an option, but not the only option. Is a life of self-sacrifice and penance the way to happiness? We should not deny ourselves the happiness that also arises in this world. If the material world is unreal, then happiness and suffering are also unreal. There would be no cause for change or improvement, for the properties of the unreal would be unreal themselves. We do not wish to accept this conclusion, so we must reject the premise that the world is unreal. Again, the charges levelled at world-denying *māyāvada* cannot be levelled at Śamkara. His metaphysic, as we have shown, does not hold the world to be unreal. Thus we see that world-denying *māyāvada* suffers from two main problems: it is inconsistent and paradoxical; and since it negates the world, it also negates potential ethical value systems within that world.

World-denying *māyāvada* causes significant moral dilemmas. We believe that world-affirming *māyāvada* provides a much better metaphysical foundation on which to base Advaitin ethics. Now we shall discuss the ethical implications of this doctrine, beginning with a discussion of Vivekananda, before progressing to Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo. World-affirming *māyāvada* provides an excellent

foundation for action and development in the material world, for it asserts two important things: the world is manifested by *Brahman* and therefore at the ultimate level all is one; and our true nature is the ultimately Real *Ātman*. Since the material world is real as a manifestation of *Brahman*, there is value in action in that world.

Vivekananda asserts that positive action in the world is a reflection of that which forms its base (*Brahman*): "Whatever anyone is doing, he is doing it in the hope of gaining that Supreme Bliss. Only, not everyone is conscious of it and so cannot understand it".[205] Form and distinction are the outcome of the subjective intellect, caused by *māyā*. When we acquire ultimate knowledge, we may see that all is of the same essence. Moreover, our true nature is *Brahman* and all that *Brahman* is; infinite, free, and so on. Since we are all of the same essence, we can help ourselves by helping others: "we must work for lessening misery, for that is the only way to make ourselves happy".[206] Our happiness is directly relative to the happiness of others. This is a major factor in the establishment of a moral realism, where overall wellbeing is supersedes subjective moral views. The existence of *Brahman* allows the Advaitin to positively assert the truth of realism in ethics, so that objective moral values can be established for the good of all.

Knowledge of *māyā* allows us to see things for what they really are – that all cultures are essentially the same and all people are in essentially the same situation – and prompts us to act accordingly. Vivekananda explains that this knowledge shall increase moral productivity while simultaneously decreasing

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[205] Vivekananda (1999), V, p. 393.
[206] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 99.

fanaticism. He argues that it is the calm, practical person who achieves the best outcomes, and hence knowledge of *māyā* shall result in an increased level of moral action.[207] There is much room, then, for positive action in the phenomenal world. The Neo-Vedāntic ideal is not divided into a dichotomy of enlightenment or nothing. Consequently while enlightenment remains the ultimate goal, worldly action is not just a means to an end; but an end in itself. Knowledge of *māyā* may achieve a positive outcome in *this* world, because we can see that we are essentially the same as everyone else, and we are all moving in the same direction towards conscious unity: "But only one thing is certain; the mighty river is rushing towards the ocean, and all the drops that constitute the stream will in time be drawn into that boundless ocean".[208] Every good action brings us closer to consciously realising the unity of all things.

Freedom can be attained through positive action. If the material world was unreal, there would be no use for action, except to renounce it, abandon the body and focus solely on *Brahman*. While the Advaitin goal of enlightenment remains, the material world cannot be rejected. Everything in the world contains *Brahman*; is *Brahman*. Action then becomes not only possible and useful, but also highly desirable. We can change our situation, for our nature is *Brahman*, and *Brahman* is free. Here is a very important point: we may attain enlightenment *in this life, here and now*: "You are also that undivided *Brahman*. This very moment you can realise it, if you think yourself truly and absolutely to be so".[209] Through positive action, we can achieve mergence with *Brahman* in this lifetime. As a small digression we must note that there is a fundamental difference between many

[207] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 101.
[208] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 102.
[209] Vivekananda (1999), V, p. 393.

Western and Indian philosophers, in that the former distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive motivations, whereas the latter hold philosophy to be a prescriptive enterprise. Thus even in metaphysics there is an underlying end related to what we *ought* to do, depending on the ontological situation in which we find ourselves. Metaphysics and ethics are consequently bound together in a way not usually encountered in the West, so that an ethical discussion will almost always be preceded by a metaphysical one. The Advaitin ethical system, then, is realist, because all material life is judged to be of the same whole (*Brahman*). If all is of the same essence, then objectively true morality exists. It is our opinion that this is an advantage in terms of ethical debate, as the Advaitin does not have to admit moral relativity. Ultimate knowledge should reveal the absolute truth of such matters. There is much discussion surrounding objectivity and relativity in morality, and it is not our place here to enter into this problem. Our point is simply that because the Advaitin morality rests on its metaphysic, the task is simplified. This leaves the Advaitin with more time to focus on real problems that cannot be solved by meta-ethical discussion, however valuable such discussion may be.

Vivekananda holds that in our material lives we are bound by nature and yet yearn for freedom. Without freedom, life is pointless, and it is to this end that we either believe or hope that we are free. According to Vivekananda all existence is characterised by freedom: “What is this universe? From what does it arise? Into what does it go? And the answer is: In freedom it rises, in freedom it rests, and into freedom it melts away”.[210] At every stage of life we are bound by *māyā*, and

[210] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 125.

yet at the same time we feel that we are free, due to the freedom of *Brahman-Ātman*. This call to freedom is the base of good ethics, for when we move toward freedom we are ethical: "Work through freedom! Work through love! Love never comes until there is freedom".[211] Freedom, therefore, is essential to any good action. And freedom is achieved, as we have seen, through knowledge of, and liberation from, *māyā*.

Once we are aware of our true situation we may realise what we must do in order to improve the living conditions of others in this world. Meaningful action must be directed from within, as coercive action does not generate any compassion or love. If actions do not come from within with strong knowledge and compassion behind them, it is impossible to say whether they or good or not, because 'duty' can be defined in any number of ways.[212] But the Neo-Vedāntin may formulate an idea of duty thus: to move toward the Oneness is to commit a dutiful action; to move against the Oneness is to commit an undutiful action. With this understanding, *māyā* simply becomes the medium within which we move toward our impending freedom, resulting in the love of the whole. The Oneness is in everything and we must act accordingly: "So work, says the Vedānta, putting [*Brahman*] in everything and knowing It to be in everything… [*Brahman*] is already in every work, in every thought, in every feeling".[213] Working to alleviate suffering in the material world is to work towards *Brahman*, for material life and *Brahman* are one and the same. Vivekananda claims that there is one idea of duty that is intuitive to all people: "Do not harm any living being; not injuring any

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[211] Vivekananda (1999), I, p. 57.
[212] Vivekananda (1999), I, p. 64.
[213] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 150.

being is virtue, injuring any being is sin".[214] The doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*) introduces the Neo-Vedāntic conception of love. Love makes that which is difficult much easier. Great actions are unselfish, for the ego dissolves when we understand the unity of all things and our duty in this world. Such action is based on love and freedom: "Duty is sweet only through love, and love shines in freedom alone".[215] Love of other beings is created by the acknowledgment of the inherent Oneness of all things. Love is a natural feeling, for it verifies the unity of *Brahman* and the world. Freedom is knowledge of Reality; love is the manifestation of that knowledge; and duty is the natural outcome of universal love.

The world is real, and there is value in action within it. Freedom is of the utmost importance. Since the *Ātman* is identical to *Brahman*, the individual good cannot be distinguished from the collective good. Objectively there is non-difference among all things. This truth can be understood with the sublation of limited knowledge in favour of ultimate knowledge. When all life is understood in this holistic sense, there is no need to distinguish between our good and the good of others. In fact, such distinction is harmful since it directly opposes the Advaitic state of the world. The suffering of another is literally our suffering. The division between self and other is removed, and we are left with the truth of the whole. Hence there is an emphasis of the Oneness in ethics. There can only be one kind of good action; that which is for the benefit of the whole world. Hence the Neo-Vedāntic metaphysic is a prescriptive philosophy for the good of all. The metaphysic defines the ethic.

[214] Vivekananda (1999), I, p. 64.
[215] Vivekananda (1999), I, p. 67.

Vivekananda's ethical system can be summarised in the following way. The material world is real. Hence there is purpose in action not solely to achieve enlightenment, but also to improve the conditions of life within *māyā*, for both ourselves and others. Comprehension of (a) the presence of *māyā* and (b) the unity of all beings as manifestations of *Brahman* brings freedom and unity, and this comprehension can only be brought about by the realisation of the innate perfection of life. Freedom allows us to fully commit to ethical action and the betterment of the living conditions of others. Free ethical action moves all beings toward the Oneness. Movement toward the Oneness creates happiness, wellbeing, and eventually, liberation.

Radhakrishnan's ethic is also defined by the universal Oneness established in Vivekananda. To act ethically is to move towards the Oneness, and to act unethically is to move away from It. He maintains that negative thoughts and actions are "the result of our alienation from the [ultimately] Real".[216] As we move towards the Real, then, our positive thought increases, along with our desire to act accordingly. As a result our positive action also increases. Moreover, enlightenment cannot be attained without disassociating ourselves from the negativity that arises from alienation from Reality. Hence there is an interdependent relationship between ethics and spiritual progress. Ethical action moves us closer to enlightenment, just as movement towards enlightenment increases the desire to act ethically. Radhakrishnan identifies three virtues which together establish the base of an ethical life: *dama* (self-restraint); *dāna* (self-

[216] Radhakrishnan (1953), p. 104.

sacrifice); and *dayā* (compassion).[217] These three virtues negate the feelings which move against the ultimate Reality: craving; greed; and anger, respectively. Action based on restraint, selflessness, and compassion, combined with the doctrine of Oneness, achieves a positive outcome both for the community and the individual, since to benefit the group is to benefit the members of that group.

An argument has been raised by many Western critics of Advaita Vedānta, that is, the doctrine of *karma* is incompatible with the possibility of free will, since the present is held to be determined by the actions of the past. In other words, the determinism inherent in the doctrine of *karma* negates the possibility of moral choice. Radhakrishnan rejects this contention by stating that *karma* does not negate the possibility of free will; it simply explains a self-evident truth of the world, namely that action causes reaction. Every cause has an effect. *Karma* is a term used to describe the ultimate Self within the material world; the tendencies with which we are born.[218] In other words, while *karma* affects reality, it does not affect ultimate Reality, and it is the latter, not the former, which provides the motivation for ethical thought and action. The ultimate Self is free to act as It chooses. As Srivastava correctly asserts, comparing life to a game of cards: "Just as the distribution of the cards by others and the rules and regulations of the game do not disturb the freedom of the player to make whatever call he thinks fit, so also in life, though the past *samskaras* determine our present lot, one can utilise and subjugate them".[219] We may mention Kant in this context. Kant distinguishes between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, where a member of the former is determined, and a member of the latter is free. According to Kant,

[217] Radhakrishnan (1953), p. 108.
[218] Radhakrishnan (1911), pp. 467-8.
[219] Srivastava (1973), p. 145.

phenomena and noumena are two distinct realms. Phenomena are the appearances which constitute our experience. Noumena are the (presumed) things themselves which constitute reality. An action can be both determined and free, if it is due to both the empirical phenomenal series and the underlying noumenal cause. Radhakrishnan and Kant agree that material life is both determined and free, but Radhakrishnan states that the similarity ends there, for Kant "offers us only the semblance of freedom and not the reality of it", whereas the Advaitic model "gives us real freedom, freedom even in the phenomenal realm".[220] The ultimate Self shines through the ethical action of the non-ultimate self. The ultimate oneness of all things ensures our freedom, at both the material and *Brahman* levels.

Braue raises another objection to Radhakrishnan's *māyāvada*. He argues that Radhakrishnan's interpretation of *māyā*, especially the one-sided dependence of the world upon *Brahman*, is negative since it "eliminates the possibility of community…[which] requires two-sided dependence".[221] He holds that community is a relationship between individuals which is characterised by mutual dependence. Braue's conception of community seems correct; this is the common interpretation of this term. But he is incorrect to state that Radhakrishnan's *māyāvada* – which establishes *Brahman* as the material cause and the world as the effect – eliminates the possibility of community. This theory focuses on the relationship between *Brahman* and the world, not between things in the world. Accordingly, there is no part of this theory which suggests that the relationship between material individuals and things rests on one-sided dependence. The

[220] Radhakrishnan (1911), pp. 469-70.
[221] Braue (1984), p. 154.

world is held to be dependent upon *Brahman*, but individuals in a community are still dependent upon each other, just as our intuition suggests. In fact, it seems that world-affirming *māyāvada* should actually *strengthen* the communitarian spirit, since it recognises all members as part of the all-encompassing Oneness, as we have noted above. Hence we may see that Braue has misinterpreted the implication of Radhakrishnan's *māyā* as one-sided dependence.

Perhaps Radhakrishnan's clearest assertion of the permeation of Oneness in the material world is to be found in his conception of *sarvamukti*, or world-salvation. In it, he states that individual salvation does not exist; salvation can only occur universally as the enlightenment of the world.[222] Consequently, the individual who attempts enlightenment when the whole world is not enlightened is said to be reborn in order to work for the liberation of the world. This concept echoes the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva*, the liberated being who is voluntarily reborn to assist with the liberation of others. Hence the impulse of the ascetic is denied, as in Aurobindo (as we explain below), in favour of a holistic approach whereby the spiritual progress of the individual is determined by the spiritual progress of the group. Since there is no possibility of individual salvation, the pursuer of happiness and well-being must ensure the happiness and well-being of her community. Radhakrishnan's *sarvamukti* forms the base of an ethic which asserts that what is good for all is good for one, and *vice versa*.

Let us now discuss Aurobindo's ethical implications of world-affirming *māyāvada*. Aurobindo shares the view of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan that

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[222] Srivastava (1973), p. 163.

knowledge of the Oneness of the world provides motivation for just action in that world. It is action, not thought, that affects the universe. Movement and evolution in the world is given priority over asceticism. Aurobindo states that matter should be regarded as non-different from *Brahman*:

> We recognise not only eternal Spirit as the inhabitant of this bodily mansion, the wearer of this mutable robe, but accept Matter of which it is made, as a fit and noble material out of which [*Brahman*] weaves constantly Its garbs.[223]

Thus both the ascetic and materialist intuitions are rejected, since they "either deny [Reality] or else turn from Nature".[224] Since *Brahman* is one and all is *Brahman*, it follows that all life is of the same essence. Moreover, since we are all of the same essence, we may achieve social harmony by realising and promoting the Oneness that we share with each other, as Naravane asserts: "Unity for the human race by an inner oneness and not only by an external association of interests".[225] Material equality will rapidly follow spiritual harmony, propagated by compassion or love for the whole. What is good for one is good for all, and *vice versa*.

Aurobindo advocates spiritual enlightenment in the material realm, a kind of earthly immortality.[226] Human evolution to a higher state does not necessitate the severance of the *Ātman* from body or mind, but rather the transformation of the latter. The spiritualisation of matter must be the goal of human evolution. The

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[223] Aurobindo (1951), p. 6.
[224] Aurobindo (1951), p. 7.
[225] Naravane (1964), p. 206.
[226] Maitra (1965), p. 5.

nature of the *Ātman* is characterised by freedom: "liberty is the divine instinct in man, for it is the attribute of his soul".[227] Note that this is not a new concept. The Vedic conception of *satya yuga*, for instance, is essentially a description of a free and harmonious society in which people govern themselves based on a universal law of *dharma*. Since the instinct of the *Ātman* is freedom, and since matter is real, all realisation must be free. Moreover, spiritual growth and material growth are intrinsically linked, so that freedom of one entails freedom of the other. Material opulence is of no use without wisdom or intelligence, just as spiritual progress is superseded by hunger or pain. We must be spiritually open if we are to achieve material wellbeing, and we must be materially free if we are to develop spiritually. So spiritual and material freedom must arrive together; one cannot be achieved without the other. In Aurobindo's lifetime, of course, the most important type of material freedom was political freedom, the "vindication of Indian liberty";[228] the anti-colonial *swarāj* movement of which he played an important role. Since we cannot develop spiritually if we are not free, it was important for India to gain political autonomy from Britain if India was to move forward as a nation. When the *swarāj* movement reached its climax we saw a great spiritual movement which resulted in India's material freedom.

Just as material and spiritual development are inextricably linked, the evolution of the individual results in the concurrent progression of the group, and *vice versa*. Dalton states: "Once [the individual] attains realisation, to help the community and humanity in its seeking for its own truth and fullness of being must be his real object of existence. This, because as he moves towards spiritual liberation, he

[227] Malhotra, S.L. (1970), *Social and Political Orientations of Neo-Vedantism*, p. 107.
[228] Aurobindo (1948), *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance*, p. 15.

moves also towards spiritual oneness".[229] Communal harmony must therefore begin with individual harmony. Societal unity must be preceded by individual unity:

> It is from the self-determination of the free individual within the free collectivity in which he lives that we have to start, because so only can we be sure of a healthy growth of freedom and because too the unity to be arrived at is that of individuals growing freely towards perfection.[230]

A good society, then, rests on the spiritual wisdom of its members. We have established above that individual spiritual gain cannot be achieved when one is not free. Freedom and self-determination are therefore the first conditions that must be secured; and given the right conditions, spiritual and material enlightenment should follow, both for society and the individual. As Gandhi claims: "I have not a shadow of doubt that the iceberg of communal differences will melt under the warmth of the sun of freedom."[231] Advaitic non-dualism transcends individual versus group cooperation arguments, since according to our positive thesis there is no difference between group and individual good. Individual potential is manifested when we are free to develop our own faculties; so group material freedom fosters individual material freedom. Similarly, individual realisation leads us to work for the betterment of society, and so individual spiritual freedom fosters group spiritual freedom.

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[229] Dalton, Dennis (1979), 'The Theory of Anarchism in Modern India: An Analysis of the Political Thought of Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Gandhi', in R.J. Moore (ed.), *Tradition and Politics in South Asia*, p. 213.

[230] Aurobindo (1957), *War and Self-determination*, p. 44.

[231] Gandhi, M.K. (1947), *India of My Dreams*, p. 247.

The best outcome for society, of course, is a combination of material and spiritual group freedom. This is what can be called ‘group harmony’. As we have shown, the cultivation of group material freedom is necessary for the cultivation of group spiritual freedom, and *vice versa*. Both must be pursued if one or other is to be attained. Underlying group freedom is individual freedom. Individual freedom must come first, for society cannot be free unless its members are free. Since *Brahman* is manifested in the material world (matter is *Brahman*), individual freedom can be secured through the material and spiritual freedom of the group. In this respect the needs of the individual and the society are one; they complement each other and it is futile to follow one at the expense of the other.[232] Thus freedom and unity are the two necessary components of both individual and group harmony.

To summarise, Aurobindo claims that we cannot understand *Brahman* without also simultaneously understanding the material world. The outcome of this worldview is a material and spiritual synthesis. He hopes that a “spiritual religion of humanity”,[233] based on the love of the whole, will benefit all individuals in that society. Harmony (due to the Oneness of all things) and freedom (due to the inherently free nature of the *Ātman*) are essential here. Recognition of the divinity of matter and the unity of all things should encourage individuals to pursue a better life for themselves and others. The individual is the rock on which society must rest.

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[232] Aurobindo (1957), p. 90.
[233] Aurobindo (1950), *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 154.

This section has shown that our positive thesis of world-affirming māyāvada has many positive implications. Metaphysically it is better at describing the world and the empirical evidence about that world, than its world-denying counterpart. Its persuasiveness necessitates a shift from the traditional rope-snake analogy to the snake-coils analogy which better explains the doctrine. Its social implications are numerous; the most important of which is the assertion that all things are One, and that positive ethical action brings us closer to that One. Hence the needs of the individual are the needs of the group, and *vice versa*, the realisation of which forms a strong base for ethics and action in the world, here and now.

7 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that *māyāvada*, or the doctrine of *māyā*, does not deny the reality of the material world. The relationship between perfect *Brahman* and the imperfect world need not be explained by a doctrine of unreality. We have established two theories of *māyā*; world-affirming *māyāvada* and world-denying *māyāvada*, and hold that the former is the correct interpretation. The truth of world-affirming *māyāvada* means that the whole can remain whole at the objective level, and divided into parts at the subjective level, without contradiction. We base this conclusion on our reasoned evaluation of relevant texts such as the *Upanishads*, and relevant Advaitin philosophers, most notably, Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo. Many years ago Śamkara radically transformed the landscape of Indian philosophy. In the twentieth century the Neo-Vedāntins have modernised and reinvigorated the Advaitic system left to them by their predecessor, reinterpreting it to make it applicable to the contemporary world. We have shown that the world-affirming *māyāvada* established in Neo-Vedānta, and expounded in this paper, may be utilised as a prescriptive metaphysic for the good of all.

'*Brahman*, the World, and *Māyāvada*' began by examining the concept of the ultimately Real *Brahman* and contrasting it with the material world. Then it looked at the *māyāvada* of Śamkara, the original exponent of this theory. It found that Śamkara's *māyāvada* affirms the reality of the world.

'Evidence for World-Affirming *Māyāvada*' argued that *māyāvada* is characterised by its affirmation of the real world. Consequently one need not deny the reality of

the world to prove the reality of *Brahman*. To support our thesis we drew evidence from two Advaitin sources; the *Upanishads* and the Neo-Vedāntins. We showed that both sources confirm that *māyāvada* affirms the reality of the world.

'Four Features of the Neo-Vedāntic *Māyāvada*' identified four features of the contemporary world-affirming *māyāvada*, which are self-limitation of *Brahman*; inexplicable mystery; one-sided dependence; and concealment of *Brahman*. These features explain the function of *māyā* without denying the reality of the world.

'Defence of World-Affirming *Māyāvada*' defended world-affirming *māyāvada*. It began with an examination and refutation of some historical arguments against the reality of the world. Then it defended world-affirming *māyāvada* from some contemporary pluralist objections, before ending the section with two arguments for world-affirming *māyāvada* which deny the pluralist intuitions.

'Implications of World-Affirming *Māyāvada*' considered the metaphysical and ethical implications of world-affirming *māyāvada*. It found that world-affirming *māyāvada* has many positive implications, especially compared to world-denying *māyāvada*. Moreover, it has potential application in many countries, not just India, where it may increase community spirit and foster ethical group action.

World-affirming *māyāvada* challenges the notion of selfish individuality by declaring that all things and beings are of the same Oneness. Hence what is good for all is good for one, and *vice versa*. Although world-affirming *māyāvada* holds

the physical and temporal distinction in the material world to be real, this distinction is no barrier to positive communitarian action. The underlying essence of all things is whole, undivided, infinite, and free. It is a prescriptive metaphysic since its realisation necessarily leads to positive material acts, and positive material acts lead to its realisation. Thus the relationship between metaphysics and ethics is characterised by mutual reliance, where ethical action causes spiritual health, and spiritual health causes ethical action. The evolution of the world is defined by the movement towards spiritual and material freedom. We are both the means to and the eventual outcome of this evolution. As Aurobindo states: “man’s greatness is not in what he is but in what he makes possible”.[234]

We have also shown that world-affirming *māyāvada* is a plausible position in contemporary metaphysics, and should be taken seriously by all good metaphysicians. We maintain that world-affirming Neo-Vedāntic *māyāvada* asserts the logical priority of the whole over the part. Although it is commonly held in the West that the parts form the logical base of the whole, it is also possible that the opposite is true; that the whole is the logical base of the parts. We have shown that world-affirming *māyāvada* is preferable to pluralism when explaining the ontological problems that arise from limitless decomposition and emergence due to quantum entanglement. There are two points to be drawn from this comparative endeavour. The first is that properly considered, Advaita Vedānta is alive and well as a philosophical system that can approach and hopefully solve many contemporary problems. The second is that critical comparison between Eastern and Western thought and science may result in new

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[234] Aurobindo (1998), ‘Mind and Supermind’, in Peter Heehs (ed.), *The Essential Writings of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 230.

understanding, compassion, and an overall interest in the philosophy of other cultures, as well as our own.

By showing that Advaita Vedānta does not deny the reality of the material world and hence is not nihilistic or world-renouncing, we can advance this philosophy so that it may survive and prosper. Radhakrishnan states that we face a choice regarding Indian philosophy in general, and his comments are no less pertinent today than they were eighty years ago:

> The problem facing Indian Philosophy today is whether it is to be reduced to a cult, restricted in scope and with no application to the present facts, or whether it is to be made alive and real, so as to become what it should be, one of the great formative elements in human progress, by relating the immensely increased knowledge of modern science to the ancient ideals of India's philosophers. All signs indicate that the future is bound up with the latter alternative.[235]

The majority of Eastern philosophers have enthusiastically embraced Western philosophy and have gained much from their open-minded attitude. Now, we feel, is the time for their Western counterparts to return the favour. The Neo-Vedānta of Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo has been described as a glowing ray of hope and optimism. Let us use this hope and optimism to create a better world through understanding and compassion.

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[235] Radhakrishnan (1923), p. 780.

In this world of many, he who sees the One, in this ever-changing world, he who sees [*Brahman*] who never changes, as the Soul of his own soul, as his own Self, he is free, he is blessed, he has reached the goal… What makes you weak? What makes you fear? You are the One Being in the universe. Stand up then and be free.[236]

– Swami Vivekananda

yasmin sarvāni byūtāny ātmaivābhūd vijānatah tatra ko mohah kah śokah ekatvam anupaśyatah.

When, to one who knows, all beings have, verily, become one with his own self, then what delusion and what sorrow can be to him who has seen the oneness?[237]

– *Īśāvāsya Upanishad*

[236] Vivekananda (1999), II, p. 236.
[237] *Īśāvāsya Upanishad*, 7, trans. Radhakrishnan (1953).

Glossary of Technical Terms

Advaita Vedānta	Literally, 'non-dual Vedānta'. An Orthodox Hindu philosophical school based on the commentaries and treatises of Śamkara. Part of the greater Vedānta philosophical tradition. Characterised by the assertion that the ultimate truth is *Brahman-Ātman*, and the world is *māyā*.
Ātman	The ultimate Self, identical with *Brahman*, as established by the phrase '*ayamātmā brahmā*' ('this *Ātman* is *Brahman*').
ātman	The non-ultimate self, to be contrasted with the *Ātman*. The personal equivalent of the material world, in that it arises due to a lack of ultimate knowledge, caused by *māyā*.
Brahman	Ultimate Reality, characterised by Its infinite, independent, non-dual, and unchanging nature. The base of the material world. Referred to in this paper as either *Brahman* or ultimate Reality (note upper-case *R*).

Jīva	The living or individual self, to be contrasted with the universal Self (*Ātman*). Often mistaken for the ultimate Self from within *māyā*.
Jñāna	True knowledge (the knowledge that the ultimate *Ātman* is identical with *Brahman*). The antonym of *ajñāna* (lack of true knowledge).
Material world	Non-ultimate reality (ie. the material universe). Characterised by plurality and change, and, according to Advaita Vedānta, dependant upon *Brahman* (note lower-case *r*).
Māyā	The Advaitin explanation of the relationship between the perfect whole (*Brahman*) and the imperfect part (the material world). Often incorrectly translated as illusion.
Māyāvada	Literally, the 'theory of *māyā*' or 'doctrine of *māyā*'.
Mokśa	Emancipation, liberation, attainment of enlightenment.

Neo-Vedānta

Used to describe the thought of several contemporary Advaita Vedāntins. Influential Neo-Vedāntins include Swami Vivekananda and his *guru* Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa; Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan; and Sri Aurobindo.

Śamkara

The first philosopher to consolidate the doctrine of *māyā* and other Advaitin principles. Generally considered to be the first exponent of Advaita Vedānta (c. 788-820 C.E.).

Śruti

Literally, 'that which is heard' (c.f. *smriti*, 'that which is remembered'). The canon of orthodox Hindu sacred texts, including (but not limited to) the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* (late *Vedas*), and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Usually held to be authorless, they are from the period of 'revelation' and as such represent the Hindu truth of the world. The various interpretations of the *śruti* are what separate the orthodox Hindu philosophical schools.

Vedānta

Literally, 'culmination of knowledge', or 'essence of the *Vedas*'. Sometimes referred to as Uttara Mimamsa. A philosophical tradition which is comprised of several orthodox Hindu philosophical

	schools (with primary exponent in brackets): Advaita (Śamkara); Viśistādvaita (Ramanuja); Dvaita (Madhva); Dvaitādvaita (Nimbārka); Shuddhadvaita (Vallabha Achintya); and Bhedābheda (Chaitanya Mahaprabhu).
Vedānta Sūtra	Written by Bādarāyana, it is the seminal *smriti* ('that which is remembered') of the Vedānta philosophy, the various interpretations of which separate the Vedāntin philosophical schools mentioned above.
Vidyā	Knowledge, often used to describe ultimate knowledge (knowledge of *Brahman*). The antonym of *avidyā* (lack of knowledge).
World-affirming *māyāvada*	*Māyāvada* as proposed in this paper, the theory that upholds the ontological possibility of *Brahman* while maintaining the reality of the material world.
World-denying *māyāvada*	*Māyāvada* as proposed by Deussen *et al*, the theory that denies the reality of the material world.

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